



BLAISE NDALA
IN THE BELLY OF THE
CONGO

TRANSLATED BY AMY B. REID

PRAISE FOR
IN THE BELLY OF THE CONGO

“Ndala paints a compelling picture of his heroines...but as he moves between the 1950s and the early 2000s, he keeps his sights and his readers’ on the long-deferred reckoning of Belgium and Congo with their colonial past.”

—*Five Books*, The Best Recent Novels from Francophone Africa

“A harrowing story, beautifully told. Blaise Ndala’s searing depiction of the effects of Belgium’s *mission civilisatrice* in the Congo should send shivers of recognition down spines in any country shaped by European imperialism—including our own.”

—Wayne Grady, author of *Emancipation Day* and *The Good Father*

“Inside the belly of this masterfully crafted journey is a series of love stories reminiscent of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* in its love and study of community, people, and places. And with that much love comes a series of unflinching betrayals. Ndala’s work is exciting and heartbreaking in its exacting style. I left this book feeling deeply punctuated.”

—Téa Mutonji, award-winning author of *Shut Up You’re Pretty*

“Dynamic, sensuous, and intensely alive, *In the Belly of the Congo* tells the story of two generations of remarkable women, each bearing the lingering scars of colonialism; each searching their histories and their futures for human dignity, for truth and reconciliation, ultimately for healing. In this his long-overdue debut in English, Blaise Ndala has crafted a novel of passion, insight, and relevance.”

—C.S. Richardson, award-winning author of *All the Colour in the World*

“A work that explores with panache the complexity of colonial and postcolonial relations between the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Belgium...successful thanks to the talent of the author, who in a few sentences can take the reader from the darkest years of colonial history to the languor of Congolese rumba, from the intense pain of a punch in the stomach to the passion of a romantic relationship.”

—*Le Monde*

“Blaise Ndala colorfully makes African history resonate.”

—*Le Point*

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BLAISE NDALA

Translated from the French by Amy B. Reid



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TO

ANASH AND SUZANNE

MOTHERS BEYOND COMPARE
SPOUSES OF TIME

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*Forward, People! Claim the land as yours.
Take it. From whom? No one.
Take this land from God. God gives the land to men.
God offers Africa to Europe. Take it.
Where kings would bring war, bring concord.*

—Victor Hugo

Speech on the occasion of the 31st anniversary of the abolition of slavery, May 18, 1879

*We carry our history with us.
We are our history.*

—James Baldwin

“Black English: A Dishonest Argument,” 1980

*Me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody.
We need some kind of tomorrow.*

—Toni Morrison

Beloved, 1987

CHRONOLOGICAL OVERVIEW OF THE FORMER BELGIAN CONGO (1885–2005)

1885: At the end of the Berlin Conference, organized by the German chancellor Otto von Bismarck and attended by fourteen countries, Africa is divided among the European colonial powers. In Belgium, the legislative chambers authorize the king to become the leader of a separate state.

Drawing on the information received over the years about Central Africa from the British explorer and journalist Henry Morton Stanley, King Léopold II creates the Congo Free State (CFS). The territory will be recognized as his private property, even if he never once visits it.

1895–1897: During this period there were several armed conflicts between Congolese resistance fighters and elements of the Public Force, the armed forces of the CFS. The bloodiest took place in the region of Kasai, in the center of the country. They will come to be known as the Batetela rebellions, named after one of the main ethnic groups that led the resistance to colonial conquest.

1895–1900: An unprecedented international campaign is waged against the CFS in Europe and the United States. Its spokesmen denounce crimes of mass violence against the “natives” of Congo. Particular attention is drawn to the severed hands of laborers who failed to collect their quotas of rubber (sap from the hevea or Pará rubber tree), a natural product whose value had rapidly increased since the invention of the rubber tire and the subsequent boom in the North American and European automobile industries.

1903: The British diplomat Roger Casement submits a report to the Foreign Office documenting the systematic atrocities committed against the Congolese people. In response to the report, a note is sent to the administration of the CFS and to the signatories of the General Act of the 1885 Berlin Conference.

1908: Because the conclusions of the investigating commission created in response to the Casement report proved especially damning for King Léopold II, the Belgian parliament votes to transfer the administration of the CFS to the Belgian kingdom. The colony is officially renamed the Belgian Congo.

Under Belgian control, Article 2 of the Colonial Charter of October 18, 1908, asserts that: “No one shall be forced to work directly or for the indirect profit of any company or individual.” To distance itself from the scandal of the hands severed under CFS control, the new colonial regime abolishes forced labor and shifts agricultural production from rubber to cotton and oil palm.

1914–1918: The Congo participates in and supports the Belgian war effort militarily and economically. In Africa, there are battles between German troops and Belgian Congolese units in the areas surrounding Rwanda-Urundi and in eastern Belgian Congo.

1941–1945: Occupied by the Germans during World War II, Belgium loses much of its prestige in the eyes of the Congolese people, who witnessed the colonizer’s defeat in 1940 on multiple fronts. The first Congolese political organization, the Alliance of Bakongo (Alliance des Bakongo, or ABAKO), is founded in 1940. In 1941, uprisings roil Élisabethville, the second largest city in the colony. In 1944 there are insurrections in multiple locations, culminating in strikes and protests in and around the port of Matadi in the far west of the country on November 25 and 26, 1945.

At this point, two resistance movements take shape: one joining workers, peasants, and soldiers who opt for violent resistance; the other employing peaceful strategies, led by intellectuals. In 1944, the second group published a manifesto seeking to have colonial power attribute specific rights to those natives recognized as “evolved,” or *evolués*—a status given to Africans who completed ten or more years of schooling.

1958: Belgium organizes the World’s Fair in Brussels.

1960: In June, the Belgian Congo achieves independence and is renamed the Republic of the Congo. Patrice Lumumba, a former union leader and the charismatic head of the Congolese National Movement, is named prime minister in a parliamentary government, with Joseph Kasavubu, the leader of ABAKO, as president of the republic.

In July, the wealthy province of Katanga, whose political leaders remained closely tied to Belgian financiers, secedes. The insurgents declare Lumumba, a proponent of a united Congo, “a public enemy.”

1961: Arrested in January on the order of the head of the army, Joseph-Désiré Mobutu—whom he had previously mentored—Patrice Lumumba is taken to Katanga, where he is assassinated by a group of secessionists, assisted by Belgian mercenaries. A violent repression is unleashed against his supporters throughout Congo.

On September 18, the secretary-general of the UN, the Swede Dag Hammarskjöld, dies in an airplane crash in Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia). He’d been on his way to meet the leader of the Katangan secessionists, Moïse Tshombe, in the town of Ndola.

1963: End of the Katangan secession.

1965: Coup d’état led by Joseph-Désiré Mobutu, who declares himself president of the republic.

1966: Mobutu designates Patrice Lumumba a national hero.

1971: Calling for a “return to authenticity,” Mobutu launches a campaign for a return to African values. He takes the name of Mobutu Sese Seko Kuku Ngbendu Wa Za Banga and renames the country the Republic of Zaire.

1990: Popular calls for democracy challenge Mobutu’s absolute rule. Student protests in Lubumbashi, in the former province of Katanga, are brutally repressed. Belgium cuts diplomatic ties to Zaire and, at the same time, declares Mobutu persona non grata on her territory.

1997: The fall of Mobutu, who is defeated by troops led by Laurent-Désiré Kabila, a former Lumumbist Marxist, supported by the Rwandan and Ugandan armies and with the blessing of the United States. Kabila suspends the constitution and rebaptizes the country the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

2001: Laurent-Désiré Kabila is assassinated in Kinshasa by one of his bodyguards. His son, Major General Joseph Kabila, assumes power.

2005: The Democratic Republic of the Congo adopts a new Constitution with a semi-presidential system of government.

**THREE MONTHS
BEFORE
THE OPENING
OF THE BRUSSELS
WORLD'S FAIR
EXPO 58**

Everywhere you look, in color or black-and-white, there he is, on the right side of the photo. Each time the commissioner-general of Expo 58, Baron Guido Martens De Neuberg, needed his velvety voice, his athletic silhouette, and his sparkling white smile, Robert Dumont had stepped up. No matter the time, place, or subject.

Robert Dumont: so efficient, always true to his word. To say this Walloon was the personification of fidelity was something of an understatement. To quote Baron De Neuberg, who praised his many talents in the art of clearing land mines, “He was always a length ahead, focused on achieving the impossible.” Recognized as one of Belgium’s most influential bankers, Robert was both exuberant and extremely private, calm, cool, and collected—the exact opposite of his friend Guido. A man as impeccably dressed in the city as in the countryside of the Ardennes where he retreated to escape from the frenzied pace of the capital, he was, in the eyes of Baron Guido Martens De Neuberg, one of those guardian angels the heavens send to simplify the lives of the elect.

As he approached fifty, he would have liked to preserve the reputation he’d so carefully constructed, sometimes following in the footsteps of the mighty, at others keeping as far as possible from the centers of power. But now entrusted with the most delicate portfolio inherited by the newly elected social-liberal government, where his friend counted as many allies as adversaries, Robert had seen dark clouds gathering on the horizon. Catapulted into the position of subcommissioner of the World’s Fair by Baron De Neuberg, he’d drawn up a list of the dangers ahead. As he raced along the obstacle course that had become the committee’s daily routine, there was just one thought—a haunting premonition, really—that he could not shake. The pressure on the team he and the commissioner-general formed would only continue to mount, and soon it would be unbearable.

Yet he knew how to choose his battles—he was not the sort to take up Sisyphus’s challenge without having first measured the boulder’s weight.

Still, with the first wave of articles railing against “De Neuberg’s style,” and decrying how, “by playing the ostrich, the baron risked delivering Belgium a stinging failure,” his doubts crystallized. He ought to have trusted his instincts, listened from the start to the voice whispering that the success of the World’s Fair was a deeply personal matter for the commissioner-general. The mother of all the battles that the man, his friend for more than thirty years, continuously waged against his internal demons. Battles to which he’d sacrificed his time, sleep, and energy—that was clear to everyone who rubbed elbows with the baron, whether in his private residence in Uccle or in the villa in Belvédère that the Royal Foundation had put at his disposal for the duration of the fair.

Robert was one of the few who knew that this global rendezvous would be the final curtain call before Guido Martens De Neuberg retired from the public stage. The man who was so happy to play the lead wanted Expo 58 to be like a fireworks display, lighting up the sky before he turned the page and began his next act far from the footlights, as a collector and dealer specializing in primitive art. “Who knows, my dear Robert,” he’d confided, “maybe I’ll open a gallery on the shores of the Thames, as my colleague there in our Congo keeps suggesting, in telegram after telegram. But if you ask me how I imagine my grand finale, the last act of my long march beneath the tricolored flag, I can only say that it will be unforgettable. I intend to give all Belgians something to remember, and then bow out. There’s only one thing spurring me on: finally getting to enjoy the peace and calm of anonymity.”

As January stretched on, Robert Dumont was more and more convinced that, if the former judge at the head of the organizing committee refused an all-out battle against his many detractors, it was simply because the “great coup” had become his sole focus in life. A grand finale that the kingdom would applaud when the curtain fell on the biggest event the world had seen since the end of the Second World War.

De Neuberg was betting that on that day, he'd stare down not only those skeptics fretting about national prestige but certain former rivals, passed over by the king, who used journalists to ambush him indirectly. That moment when he would prove to his father, who'd turned his back on him when he was just a baby, wailing in a cradle, that a lucky star had taken the place of the man who ought to have been the sun of his life and led him to this consecration.

There in his American exile, the elder Martens would learn that the abandoned son had burnished the only inheritance he'd left him—a patronym that once echoed through the courtrooms of the Palace of Justice in Brussels—to a shine that would make any scion of a good family pale with envy. When Brussels was decked out in all its finery, Belgium's favorite son would restore to the kingdom the honor and prestige it had lost in the eyes of the civilized world after the humiliation of the Nazi occupation. That—the commissioner-general predicted between two shots of cognac—would be the first step on the long path that would one day lead to their reconciliation. And for that long-deferred reconciliation, he would set the conditions.

Nothing was less certain, Robert thought.

Because they were totally unaware of the mad hope that lived buried deep in Guido Martens De Neuberg—unaware of the flame that had consumed him since his youngest days—the women and men who crossed his path saw only one side of the mountain, the side where he basked in the glow of his own self-assurance: “Baron Narcissus,” that was the nickname bestowed by the French press and which his friend so often trotted out to tease him.

The subcommissioner was keenly aware that by asking for his services, the baron had demonstrated both lucidity and realism. Time had allowed them both to take measure of a loyalty matched only by the confidence they had in each other. Having followed closely Robert's brilliant career in the world of finance, Guido had seen for himself the many talents of the bow-tied banker, as he was known to his fellows. Negotiations and communications were not the least among them.

Beneath the coffered ceilings of the royal palace, the euphoria that had welcomed the announcement in November 1953 that Belgium would host the prestigious event had given way to gloom.

That morning, before a gathering of counselors in the sumptuous Salon du Vase, the grand marshal of the royal court made no attempt to hide his exasperation: “We will not be ready! De Neuberg is playing the king for a fool, and you can be sure I intend to put an end to that. I expect clear explanations from him—no more of that double-talk his alter ego feeds reporters at each of his press conferences.” The power behind the throne was irritated by a series of reports insinuating that work on the fairgrounds was seriously behind schedule. And if that weren’t bad enough, the national press was unanimous in asserting that France, with its eighty-meter-long arrow atop the pavillion designed by the architect Guillaume Gillet, was set to upstage the host country.

No one sitting at that table thought it wise to recall that for five years a series of governments had, one after the other, proclaimed the Atomium in Brussels the eighth wonder of the world, much to the delight of King Baudouin and Queen Fabiola, who could barely contain their enthusiasm.

The grand marshal of the court was stewing in anger. He hoped to muster arguments sufficient to convince the head of state, who in turn would easily make Prime Minister Achille Van Acker see that the executive branch had bet on the wrong horse. Guido Martens De Neuberg, the man from Limburg whom the kingdom had entrusted with the mission of making Heysel, north of the capital, the center of the world, was simply not the genius they’d imagined. Far too many signs led to the conclusion that the baron needed a captain capable of leading Expo 58 safely to port. If De Neuberg couldn’t live up to the responsibility the palace had placed on him, then he needed to be shown the door. Three months ahead of the official opening, there was no more time to waste.

o say that the commissioner-general detested the grand marshal of the royal court would be another understatement. Guido Martens De Neuberg **T**ignored the invitation to come to the palace and instead sent his adjutant to cross swords with King Baudouin's inner circle.

A methodical man, Robert Dumont knew it was time to get a handle on what was quickly becoming a festering crisis. He warned the baron against taking aim at the wrong target. The king's senior adviser was acting within the scope of his duties to keep the chief of state informed. Once again, because they had little to feed the public, journalists and commentators had taken on the role of Cassandra, crying wolf in order to provoke a reaction and learn the truth. If they couldn't convince the press, they needed to seduce them. And seduction is a tango, a highly choreographed dance for two. Clearly there were delays, but it was quite a leap from that to the suggestion that the house was on fire—yet, sadly, there was no shortage of misinformation circulating. His first mission was to reassure everyone. Words mattered, but so did style. He would take charge of it personally and ensure a strict control of communication channels.

His eyes brimming with optimism, but without even a hint of obsequiousness, he would let it be known who was at the plane's controls. The journalists were just doing their duty and the committee, while remaining steadfastly focused on their assigned task, only wanted to make things easier for them. Feeding into reports and editorials circulated by the foreign press about the looming catastrophe did nothing to reassure the Belgian public. The few bungles noted here and there in no way justified fiery predictions of a national humiliation. Belgium had lived through worse.

You had the subcommissioner's word on it.

They were in the midst of that attempt at reconciliation when, in his spacious office in the villa in Belvédère, Commissioner-General De Neuberg gave in to one of those impulses so typical of him. Impulses which, all too often, short-circuited the efforts of the communication virtuoso who struggled week after week to protect the impetuous baron from himself. "I understand, I understand what you're saying, Robert. Still,

I am far more determined to see the icing put on this cake on the evening of October 19 than is that lackey dressed in his Sunday best who has done nothing more than play the role of inspector without ever leaving the palace. You know what? You're going to go see him and let him know in no uncertain terms that we are not a ragtag bunch of incompetents. And if Mister Grand Marshal of My Latrines treats you badly, you just turn and head back to headquarters. Then it will be I, Guido Martens De Neuberg, ennobled because I stood up to the Wehrmacht during the two hundred and six days of my captivity, who speaks to the king himself. Enough is enough!"

The ailment eating away at the baron had nothing to do with anger. Nor with self-assurance. It was something much more banal: The man wanted to be loved. Yet Robert doubted that all the love Belgium might offer would be enough to assuage his friend who, after a meteoric career in the courts, had exchanged, much to everyone's surprise, a judge's robes for a military uniform and then taken on a series of ministerial portfolios after the liberation. As far as Robert could tell, the ailment had one and only one face: the father effaced by four decades of silence, the one he'd nicknamed "the great deserter."

No, the commissioner-general would not go to the palace.

"Should I come up with some excuse to mollify him? He's just out to thwart our plans. If he wants a fight, he'll get it. Now is the time—no two ways about it. I'll leave it to you to go, and I'll focus on what my associate there in his villa in Léopoldville has to say. Between two visits to the worksite, I need to decide what we should take care of first, securing the masks in rare wood from Kasai or the brass statues from Katanga. My word! I'd be running one of the largest galleries in London if I could tell a Pygmy arrow from the scepter of a Lunda king—Lunda, Kuba, or who knows what Congolese tribe! Ah, those great lords of the tropics! Anyway,

I'm off on a tangent, Robert, a tangent. I'll let you head to the palace. You'll know how to handle it...Just like always."

When he faced off against the duo comprised of the grand marshal of the royal court and the master of protocol, Robert Dumont tried in vain to summon the confidence of his days of glory.

The subcommissioner remembered that one of his tried-and-true methods for covering a lack of preparation consisted of flooding his audience with waves of information that, by and large, could not be quickly checked and disproven. If you forged ahead with enough momentum, you won the match. So he stated, after laying out on the table the model carefully prepared by his secretary, that the construction of the Atomium was "nothing more or less than a miracle of science and technology." He droned on about what the Polak brothers, the two architects of the unusual monument at the heart of so many fantasies, had reportedly said. In truth, from Dreef in the north to Torgny in the south, from De Panne in the west to the hamlet of Krewinkel in the far eastern reaches of Wallonie, there was not one single Belgian who hadn't yet heard, whether on the radio, in the cigar store, or at the corner butcher shop, those magical syllables: at-om-i-um.

Though he stammered and got lost in the figures that had been jotted down any which way, he finally found the right piece of paper, which had slipped between two press communiqués. He emphasized that of the nine spheres that would make up the masterpiece under construction, six would be accessible to the public, each comprised of two main floors and a lower level, for the staff. As for the central tube, it would house the fastest elevator in the world, rising at a speed of five meters per second. The metal shops in Jambes, on the outskirts of Namur, had just received an order to build the three medium-size balls for the top. The delay caused by a foreign supplier who'd broken the terms of their contract would be made up within two weeks. The same approach was being applied to other important tasks.

“Where the editorialist of the *Volksgazet* sees a drifting boat,” he went on, “I see a crew united by an unshakable determination and lined up behind Commissioner-General De Neuberg. I see men capable of taking hold of the rudder each time the contingencies of such an important project require it. There is not one among us who believes he was born from Jupiter’s thigh, but we are there to prove that the word ‘impossible’ has no meaning in any of our national languages. I was charged with reassuring the king and queen about what exactly all our fellow citizens will see on the morning of April 17. And if our French neighbors on the far side of Quiévrain want to humiliate us, as the chroniclers from the north of the country are apt to believe...well, my word, they’ll need to bring the Eiffel Tower.”

Then came more numbers, delivered with confidence, not even a hint of an error.

The visitor was regaining his swagger when the grand marshal of the royal court led him onto a particularly slippery slope. It was one of the rare topics on which he and his superior disagreed. The sort of detail that he would have liked to settle in a frank discussion with the commissioner-general before discussing it with men from the palace.

“Monsieur Dumont, please do not worry if you do not have specific answers for my final questions. This is not an exam, after all, and you don’t risk being held back a year. But, tell us...this ‘Congolese village’ that will have its own pavilion in Heysel, how do you imagine it?”

“The idea was not put forward by our committee, my dear sir—”

“I know that it’s not your idea, Monsieur Dumont. We have already heard from the minister of the colonies on this very topic. Yet it is you who will give life to this village, unless I am mistaken?”

“Well, um...It will be, in some sense, a reconstruction of a Congolese village, but in a pavilion.”

“Of course, in a pavilion. Of course. This will be part of Expo 58, hard to have it set up in a pirogue on the Congo River. But are you going to... um...What I’m saying is, are we going to have a repeat of Tervuren in 1897?”

“Oh no, sir, a hundred times no. Please reassure the king on that point. We will in no way reproduce the village of 1897. This is the twentieth century.”

“Of course, this is the twentieth century, Monsieur Dumont. How silly of me to ask! But, um...What will we do differently in the twentieth century, subcommissioner? How will the committee led by Baron Guido Martens De Neuberg, which, according to the king, is composed of the best experts in the country, help Belgium to do things differently?”

Robert Dumont felt the muscles in his belly contract. He swallowed. Beneath the mahogany table, he began to frenetically move his knees in and out, quickly but without letting them touch—a nervous tic that betrayed the extreme stress he felt. Although it escaped the notice of his interlocutors, the cadence seemed to match the rhythm of the second hand on the clock, whose sharp and regular ticking nibbled slowly away at the quarter of an hour remaining till the end of the meeting.

—

When invited to join Expo 58, the banker had told himself just one thing: This was the sort of challenge that comes only once in a lifetime. Never had he thought, not even for one minute, about the Congolese dossier. Of course, the colonial fact was an integral part of the national reality. Belgium, it went without saying, could not host yet another World’s Fair in the nation’s brief life without once again showing the rest of the world the successes of its civilizing mission in Central Africa and, more specifically, in its “model colony.” But this was neither 1894 nor 1897, when King Léopold II was the sole ruler of the well-named Congo Free State. An immense territory that he, like a prestidigitator at the height of his art, had succeeded in protecting from the voracity of the French and the British during the 1885 Berlin Conference. Nor again was this 1935, the year of the most recent World’s Fair hosted by the kingdom, in that interwar era that did not skimp on promises but that gave no hint of the turn the colonial fact had taken at the end of the war.

Since the defeat of the Nazis and their allies, from the Russian taiga to the shores of the Mississippi, via the Rift Valley, the world was navigating waters in which little Belgium needed to tread carefully. Between the mythical figure of the now deceased “Builder King” and that of his young successor Baudouin I, there was a world of difference.

The baron and the entire committee are working around the clock to ensure things are done in the most intelligent way possible. Of that I can assure you.”

“So the ‘Congolese village’ of Expo 58 is conceived in such a way that our efforts on behalf of the natives will be presented to the community of nations as it has always been: the mark of a glorious civilization that brings its light to people on the path to progress. That is how Baron De Neuberg and his committee see things, isn’t it, Monsieur Dumont?”

“Grand Marshal of the Court, I assure you that Baron De Neuberg takes very seriously the duty that the palace and the government were so kind as to entrust to him. Within the committee, we continue to work on the question of the colonies and other equally important questions with intelligence and patriotism.”

“I have the impression of hearing a politician in the middle of a campaign, but that is precisely the role of our beloved baron’s most faithful lieutenant, am I right? Be that as it may. My final question is the following: Since we are not doing things as they were done in the previous century, do you still intend to bring the future villagers from the Congolese hinterland?”

On that point, Robert Dumont had the right information at hand—and he delivered it without stammering. It would not be necessary to transport Africans from the depths of the equatorial forest or some isolated savanna, not by boat or plane. The minister of the colonies had already in hand five students—three male and two female—who had sadly failed their university exams. It wasn’t clear whether they should be directed to other fields of study or sent back to the colonies, where they would join the ranks of those

agitators dreaming of self-determination and other such fashionable nonsense on the shores of the Congo River. At the suggestion of the cabinet of the minister of the interior, the five had been approached and a deal proposed: They would play roles in the pavilion in exchange for a certain sum of money and a guarantee that they could stay in the metropole. That would allow them, if they wished, to undertake other studies.

“And was this proposal well received, subcommissioner?”

“Of the five, three have signed contracts, all witnessed and recorded. Two men and one woman. The group will be trained by specialists in the field. I’m talking about experts in popular entertainment who have worked more or less everywhere across Europe. Our collaborators have to their name no fewer than eighty-seven spectacles, and a total cast of—let me confirm the figures...”

“Please, take your time, my dear sir.”

“...of three hundred thirteen natives from all corners of Africa, from the mouth of the Senegal River to the islands of the Indian Ocean.”

“I’d prefer to make my own assessment. And what about the two recalcitrant students?”

“They will be sent back to their homeland. Well, at least that’s what the minister seems to have decided.”

“Very good, very good. Three Negroes for a ‘Congolese village.’ If that’s all you are promising, subcommissioner, that’s fairly slim.”

“Yes, it is, Grand Marshal of the Court. We will continue to work on this.”

“Do you have a number? A magic number?” inquired the master of protocol, who had remained on the sidelines since the start of the discussion.

“The committee is planning on a minimum of ten Congolese natives, sir. We would like to exhibit five or six Negro males in good health, robust, skilled with their hands, who know how to sing and dance, and an equal number of females, curvaceous and just as talented. If between now and the April first deadline we can put our hands on one or two children younger than eight, everything will be set.”

Robert Dumont left the palace as the clock struck eleven. A real downpour, with unusually powerful gusts of wind, swept through the capital. At the wheel of his dark blue Renault Frégate, the unmatched and much-praised communicator had the feeling that he had given the most pitiful presentation of his public life. More than his lapses of memory, he regretted not having evoked, even in passing, the idea he had proposed to the commissioner-general, who had promised to consider it: an uninhabited village. That would have let him test the waters of the king's entourage. And that would have made it easier for him to develop his own plan or revise it based on what he learned.

Nothing to crow about to Geneviève, his wife, who had so often advised him to be wary of commitments made in the heat of the moment or against his better instincts. Remembering that he was supposed to meet his sweet better half at the Brugmann Hospital, where she had an appointment with her gynecologist, he changed direction and headed down the boulevard du Jardin Botanique.

As he passed by the worksite of the new Centre International Rogier, he couldn't keep from thinking once more about "Baron Narcissus"—his dear Guido had served him the bitter cup he was now savoring, against his better judgment. Every day made him more aware of the commissioner-general's inner torment, and he willingly admitted that he could not de-escalate his ally's battle against his father's phantom, a battle that increasingly impacted the committee's work.

Navigating a turn with one hand while grasping with the other a photo of Bénédicte, his two-year-old daughter—and the baron's goddaughter—he wondered to what extent he had ever been a model father. If, over the course of a career as time-consuming as his, his physical presence sufficed to bring peace to their home. Thinking about the child who would be born a mere few weeks before the close of the World's Fair—a child he prayed would be a boy—a scenario inspired by what he knew of Guido's chaotic adolescence edged into his mind. What if the future adult this much desired

son would become, rather than proudly bearing his name, petitioned a judge to change his identity?

Torn from this dark train of thought by the furious beeping of a car in his blind spot, he told himself that between the worksite of the Atomium and the “Congolese village,” he had too many worries to go looking for others.

As he passed under the main gate of the Brugmann Hospital on that afternoon of January 17, Robert Dumont, the subcommissioner of Expo 58 and a well-known banker in the city, had no idea what the future held. More than four decades apart, he and his son—the one to whom the love of his life would soon give birth—would meet in Brussels two African women with obscure pasts. Two breathtaking, charismatic women who would forever change the course of the Dumonts’ lives.

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PART ONE

1

He was handsome. Divine. Devilish. During the day, he smelled of death. At night, he was a whirlwind of the most exhilarating scents of the Kuba forest. The love of my life. The man responsible for my demise.

Getting close to him, or, really, letting him get close to me, got me burned. But when you're a butterfly in Kasäi, lulled to sleep by the melody of your own wingbeats in the humid night air, the only thing that matters in life is getting burned. Every breath brings you closer to forbidden flames. I came into this world to unsettle the peace of those around me. Whatever the cost.

And to end as dust.

Not beneath the red clay of the great cemetery in the forest alongside your ancestors, founders of the Kuba Kingdom, but beneath the cold lichen of Laeken.

Brussels.

The throbbing heart of the conqueror's land, weighed down by a leaden sky. Whether gray from shame or pride, I never figured that out—it all happened so fast.

Brussels.

More than forty-five years ago, this land welcomed me under a glacial night sky, just a few days before the opening of the World's Fair, and then offered me an eternal refuge deep in its bowels.

A princess caught in the trap of illicit desire. Put on display for the crowds, in the heart of a "Congolese village," where the Pygmy discovered he was the equal of the Negro, and that the master treated his own wife like

a child without free will or common sense—that same woman whom the Negro put on a pedestal back in Congo.

A princess to the end—an unspeakable end.

If I really want you, Nyota my niece, my brother's youngest daughter, to understand, I must go back to the very beginning. First, to our shared destiny, which is ordinary only because it is now cloaked in the anonymity that usually conceals misery in Belgium, where you found me. Then to the great patriarchal figures who are the source of my fall, those remarkable men to whom I offer, despite everything, the respect dictated by our centuries-old traditions. Lastly, and only then, will I bare my heart and speak of the only man I ever loved—how he burst into my life and how others took advantage of his long silence. Yes, I will tell you about those shadowy figures, what they said and did. You've already heard bits and pieces of their confessions, words that led you here to me.

Speaking of paths, you are convinced in your heart of hearts that it is just by chance, a stroke of luck, that you met that friend who brought you here this Sunday morning to the cemetery in Laeken. But could that accomplice you call “chance” have made your friend's father, once known as the bow-tied banker, a man to whom life refused so little in his native Belgium, lie here now, sharing this silent haven with a perfect stranger from the savannas of central Congo?

No, providence's powers are not without limits, my niece.

You are here because at this moment in the sun's march, in the galloping passage of time, you are ready to learn that you are not just a girl from Congo like so many others. You are Nyota, “the star of whom the river asks its way,” as they say among your people. You are my Ndoyi, my namesake—you share the name I was given at birth. That was a choice your father made because he wanted to keep me close, following a tradition as old as the dynasty of which you and I are the shadow-bearers.

Now here you are in the presence of your aunt Tshala Nyota Moelo, a princess whose exile was not foretold in the dreams that came to my late mother as she impatiently awaited the birth of her first daughter. Once I've taken you back to the root of the drama, after leading you across valleys, plains, streams, and rivers, to the shores of the seas my soul crossed before I melded into the darkness here in Belgium, you will once again stand tall and proud.

Ready to face your true destiny.

You will finally be able to set down the burden that's been weighing on your shoulders, the one the oracle reserved for all the Nyotas who came before you. An oracle whose voice was heard long before the emergence of the land that Léopold II would baptize the Congo Free State.

—

We are just a stone's throw from the crypt of the kings who once tied our fates to their fantasies—fantasies whose true meaning escapes us still. With the royal church of Notre-Dame de Laeken looming behind you, pause for a moment to consider this stone which marks my final resting place. It reads:

Tshala N. Moelo

Born in Mushenge, Belgian Congo, January 13, 1939

Died in Brussels, May 18, 1958

I know you won't really hear my voice from beyond the tomb, but that's not what matters most. In the Kuba tradition, when someone who has disappeared breaks their silence and addresses a relative who is still among the living, among those who walk with their noses glued to the ground, what matters most is not what's heard. Forgive me this long monologue, my niece, for its aim is to release the words that can undo the knots, break the chains, and light the path forward for the one who still walks. So while your friend makes peace with his father's memory, be patient and listen. For only

the power of the word can repair the mantle of honor lost under the watchful eyes of memory's vigilant guards.

We'll start with the offended. Had luck been on our side, my love for that white man would have just been unremarkable. But the one it offended cast a long and heavy shadow: my father.

Kena Kwete III, to give his dynastic name.

He was powerful. He was the law. A law unto himself. From the shores of the Kasaï to the plateaus of the Sankuru, the gleam of his ivory scepter marked the border between licit and abomination. Submission and conspiracy. His voice—a booming metallic chord that shatters the defenses of cowardice and makes wild beasts cower in the shadows—was raised before his subjects for two and only two reasons: to bless or to annihilate. Feared? For some that might have been enough, but he needed more.

He was not one of those potentates who send others to cross swords with the enemy while enjoying a good feast safe in his palace. His deeds had earned him the respect of his most feared generals. All had seen him victorious on the battlefield. His head held high. His chest adorned with cowry shells. A javelin in one hand, a bow in the other, a quiver full of arrows slung across his shoulder. His praises sung in psalms and rhymes by a chorus of women dressed in their finest mourning garb.

Set forth, vanquish, return.

Accompanied by the refrains of the Sacred Chorus of Our Warriors' Blood—the chorale comprised of the widows and orphans of Mushenge, the capital of the kingdom.

Two men made my father a living legend. Knowing about them will help you understand what fueled the fire that burned in the belly of King Kena Kwete III, and that consumed me as I stood on the threshold of

adulthood. You will understand why my being his daughter, and you his granddaughter, is not the best gift life bestowed on either of us.

Let's go back to the first days of the Nyimi dynasty—of the kings of the Kuba people. You should know that the burning coals that enflamed my father's blood were bequeathed to him by none other than King Woto, founder of the Kuba Kingdom, the most illustrious and celebrated of our ancestors.

You need to know of this forebear, who came from the far west with many servants, wives, and offspring. On the shores of the Sankuru River, he met and was challenged by an arrogant king, convinced of his own omnipotence. The monarch called out to our ancestor and his followers, who'd rampaged through savannas and forests in search of a wavering ruler to overthrow, saying, "Your long procession does not at all impress me, strangers. If there is one man among you, let him cross the river and come to this rock upon which I rest my foot. Let him place his hand upon it and sever his own index finger with one clean blow, while staring me straight in the eye. If he does, then I will submit to him. I will cede my throne as certainly as a dog rises to greet his master. He will lead the army of courageous warriors I have mustered from the six tribes of the Sankuru. I give you my word—the only one I possess—here and now, before the living and the dead."

A bold challenge to the virility of men.

A challenge Woto took up. Our ancestor paid with his own blood and became the first of the long line of one hundred and twenty-one Bakuba kings destined to fulfill the oracle his followers knew by heart, for it had set the rhythm of their steps into the unknown. An oracle delivered long ago on a distant shore first led our ancestors to the kingdom allied with Portugal, and later spurred their descendants to leave those plains and migrate east, along the lower reaches of the Kasai River. They were determined to resuscitate their former glory, convinced that valiant people were eternal, their decadence but an illusion.

With that original sacrifice, the founder of the Nyimi dynasty bequeathed to his successors, including my father, Kena Kwete III, the

sacred duty to ascend to the heights of glory and remain there, whatever the cost.

The second patriarchal figure who made my father into an uncompromising man, a monarch whose reputation crossed all rivers, was the great patriarch who preceded him on the throne, his father, King Mingashang Kwete II.

When you received your diploma from the school in Kinshasa, you knew almost everything about the battles won by many foreign kingdoms. Now that my brother has sent you to the land of our former masters to fulfill his dream by bringing home that big university diploma, you need to learn about Mingashang Kwete II, a man whose bravura blinded his contemporaries. His tale is one of the most memorable of the Nyimi epic.

Now, my niece, let's leap back in time. Not to some dusty myth but to events that took place in 1899.

That year, just after my grandfather Mingashang Kwete II acceded to the throne, Dufour, the commander of Luluabourg, the capital of Kasai Province, made a proclamation, one more decree among the many that rained down on the heads of our kings in those days. The Belgian demanded that the worthy men of the Kuba Kingdom deliver a staggering amount of grain, rubber, and also cattle. Goods to pay the taxes imposed by Bula Matari—Bula Matari being the term our people used then for the colonial government, a noun of Kongo origins meaning “stone breaker,” a reference to the ambitious public works undertaken by the occupier, notably the construction of train lines and roads that cost us many thousands of lives.

But back to Commander Dufour and the edict that sparked the deadly fire.

To set his plan in motion, the Belgian turned to a mercenary known throughout Kasai and the surrounding areas as an ally of the central power—a madman by the name of Nsapu Nsapu. Dufour asked this trader in

slaves and death to supply him with the shock troops necessary for a mission he knew would be risky. I assure you, my niece, that no one would disturb the peace and calm of the Bakubas without taking all necessary precautions, were he the personal emissary of the Belgian King Léopold II himself. If you need convincing, just remember those nights of celebration when the chorus sang till dawn and brought the Nyimi epic to life.

Some five hundred warriors armed with rifles arrived on the Domiongo plain and, under cover of darkness, built an immense fortress surrounded by a palisade. Nsapu Nsapu's men then called together the local chiefs, brandished before them the edict signed by Dufour, and demanded they surrender sixty slaves, fifty ivory tusks, forty-two goats, the contents of five granaries, and forty-five hundred balls of rubber. This last demand was really strange since, unlike the northern parts of the territory, which lie in the great equatorial forest, the cultivation of rubber was only in an experimental phase in our land. So it was impossible for even the most valiant of Bakuba peasants to gather any significant amount of that white sap which, according to the testimony of travelers and exiles, had brought hellfire raining down on the Bangala people in Équateur Province.

When the patriarchs refused to pay that unjust tribute, whose cost exceeded all measures of good sense, the mercenaries closed the gate of the palisade and massacred them, leaving none to tell the tale. The assailants then embarked upon a murderous campaign, pillaging and burning fourteen nearby villages, while our people fled the firestorm and hid in the bush.

Because of that crime, which would ultimately allow my grandfather to prove himself a worthy descendant of Woto, a Black American evangelist by the name of William Sheppard was appointed by the Presbyterian mission in the town of Luebo to carry out a thorough and impartial inquiry. He was dispatched to our territory and several notables from the royal court were assigned to assist him.

Sheppard was a man of righteous heart and incisive pen. In his report he wrote that he had personally counted ninety-one right hands that had been severed by the assailants and set out to dry in the sun. Those macabre trophies would ultimately be taken back to the officials of the Congo Free

State in Luluabourg as proof of the mercenaries' valor: They had made the Kuba pay dearly for their refusal to render unto Bula Mutari its due. The minister also noted that he himself had seen sixty-six young girls held prisoner; their suffering and mistreatment defied imagination.

Appalled, the missionaries took their protests directly to Dufour, leaving the Belgian with no other choice than to order the arrest of Nsapu Nsapu's lieutenant, who'd led the mission. This reversal of fortune was cheered in the region for it put an immediate end to the bloody union that for more than a decade had bound the outlaw Nsapu Nsapu to the colonial state.

You may well say—and you'd be right—that nothing that I've described so far sheds any light on the personality of the man from whom my father inherited both the royal scepter and the most relevant traits of his character: bravura and an obsession with vengeance whenever the honor of a Kuba monarch had been trampled underfoot.

So let's go back to the tragic events at Domiongo.

Between the moment when the fourteenth village was set ablaze and the arrival of a messenger at Luebo, my grandfather went to his mother and asked for the royal bowstring, which, as tradition required, the queen mother wore around her neck. He set off at the head of a battalion of two hundred men, armed to the teeth, to find Nsapu Nsapu. No surprise, he and his warriors were spotted by lookouts and soon faced a horde. Since the forces on both sides were equal in number, my grandfather King Mingashang Kwete II called out to Nsapu Nsapu: They needed to settle things man to man.

Hand-to-hand combat, just the two of them.

Unable to bear anything that might cast the slightest of shadows on the reputation that preceded his bastard's ass wherever he went, the chief mercenary quickly agreed. Too bad for him. Our king outclassed him in a flash, breaking his right leg like a stalk of bamboo you're about to feed to the flames. Nsapu Nsapu, who'd never in all of his stray-dog days learned that a man's honor resides in his word—freely given—grabbed a knife that one of his bodyguards tossed him. Taking advantage of a moment when our sovereign was distracted, he sliced open his belly.

The battle cry rang out.

Drums thundered.

Buffalo horns blared.

The grass on which warriors from both sides had been marching for hours became a river of blood. A river that sent forty-one families among the enemy into mourning, and seven on our side.

That is the origin of the scar your great-grandfather Mingashang Kwete II bore until his death. And moreover, such is the inheritance that my father, your grandfather Kena Kwete III, never stopped bragging about until the day chaos broke loose and destiny drove us apart. He bragged about the scar not so much in words but by his deeds and gestures, from the most significant to the most anodyne; he'd concede anything but his limitless temerity, and pardon anything but what he in his sovereign judgment deemed an offense to the honor of a Kuba monarch.

A Kuba king is a worthy descendant of Woto or he is nothing at all, not even a miserable braggart's fart.

You can count on the fingers of one hand the number of cowards who somehow wormed their way into the order of succession of the one hundred and twenty-one kings the oracle had predicted long ago as the sun of glory set over the now distant land of our birth. That day the nine stars—which had shone so brilliantly at the coronation of each of our sovereigns that at midnight the southern half of the sky gleamed as bright as dawn—were extinguished forever.

How I would have loved for my tale of the painful events at Domiongo to be just a legend.

What I told you is neither legend nor one of those myths that cradled the last nights of my childhood during my initiation. Those will wait for another time. What I told you is written in black-and-white in the books circulated by those who, one fine day in 1960, left us the keys to the House of Congo. For say what you will, the White Man, who gives but little credit to words that fly with the wind, turned writing into a servant who will do anything it's asked, beginning with offering up the last word. You must always remember this—never would the White Man have been able to

conquer the multitudes that still lie at his feet centuries after they cried for “liberty” and danced the cha-cha of *dipanda*,^[1] if he hadn’t already written their history for them. A servant who wields such great power—when the epics of some are diluted by time, and the failures of others morph into triumphs—is an ally we are duty bound to make our own. It’s our chance—perhaps our only chance—to grab hold of our destiny in this runaway century that has long refused to negotiate with us about the passage of time. I won’t blame my brother for going into debt to send you to Belgium in hopes that a great university would open its doors and confer upon you a power that none of your ancestors ever imagined.

And if the knowledge you acquire over the course of your studies should encompass the tales that Eternity is slow to offer to the many, here as elsewhere, then the Spirit of the Parrot, our shared totem, will not only have brought what was begun in secret to an open and harmonious conclusion but he will have fulfilled my deepest and most heartfelt prayers.

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According to some idle talkers there in Kasäi—where not all approved of Kena Kwete III—my father was just a puppet, a Negro king in title only, like so many others. But truth be told, the man actually felt free in the world he’d created in the depths of his own heart, safe from Bula Matari’s weapons. Although I had to choose between disgrace far from his court and suffering his wrath, I cannot take that away from him.

Drunk on power, according to his denigrators, who mocked his waning glory.

No, I cannot deny that he only retained what little power the Belgians allowed. Crumbs of grandeur. But still it was enough that his words too often led to horrors.

And if you can only remember one thing to explain my presence here in this cemetery at the end of the world, far from our kingdom’s capital, remember that everything results both from my hopeless love for a devilish stranger and your grandfather’s idea of his own honor. An idea as vast as

the sky above. An idea that could only lead to fury and blindness. The honor of Kena Kwete III, King of the Bakubas, wielded the sword that cut my in life two.

[SKIP NOTES](#)

[1.](#) “Independence” in Lingala.

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We are the sons and daughters born of this sense of honor. Against all odds, our blood has always commanded that we live up to a prediction dating back to the birth of the Kuba Kingdom.

Yet there were warning signs: My birth itself was an ominous portent for the honor of King Kena Kwete III. I was born to the first of his thirteen wives, as was your father. The only princess of my mother's womb, I emerged from the belly of the queen mother not headfirst, like all other children in the world, but feetfirst.

Those were turbulent times.

My uncle Prince Osako had just volunteered to serve Bula Matari. Against the advice of all. Of his own free will, that hulk of a man who could have felled a rhinoceros with just a flick of his wrist chose to go fight the Germans under skies unfamiliar to his forebears. While those known as Nazis were giving their contemporaries a run for their money in Europe, here Bula Matari turned everything topsy-turvy. Some kingdoms teetered; others, after a long decline marked by outrage and tribulation, quite simply disappeared. Before joining the ranks and heading off for the trenches, the prince had gone to see the king. He maintained that the Africans had already lost the only battle that mattered: the one to keep standing tall and proud.

The battle for their honor.

It was time to face the facts. We were duty bound to assist the conqueror as he reshaped our ancestral lands according to plans drawn up in far-off realms by those who'd made us bow our heads in defeat: explorers well-

versed in the art of negotiation, missionaries able to sniff out evil spirits, traffickers smitten with ivory and craftwork. Convinced he'd been censured for too long, Uncle Osako made this his motto: "Standing up against the warthog is an act of bravura, Nyimi. Puffing out your chest in the face of lightning is folly for a common mortal, a crime for a sovereign."

My father didn't see things that way. It didn't matter that all of Congo had surrendered without a fight to the successive kings who wore the Belgian crown. Nor did it matter that the despicable German monarch harbored a nightmarish dream of clothing himself in a cape made of the skin torn from the backs of the princes whose lands bordered his empire. The Bakuba king wanted to hold his head high. On his own terms. The kingdom he'd inherited from his forebears would be an island of pride in the heart of Kasai. He'd bow down to the laws of the colonial administration without renouncing his dignity. He'd ensure that his subjects paid their due to Bula Matari, but also, in exchange, that they be treated in accordance with the centuries-old rules of divine justice, which he knew were far superior to those of mortals. If he couldn't keep them from being humiliated day after day, how could he claim to be their protector?

Honor. What allows you to stand tall and proud.

At the end of drawn-out negotiations, which returned again and again to the shameful massacre committed on our land by Nsapu Nsapu and his men, he'd gotten the occupier to agree that throughout the Kuba Kingdom, the whip would be reserved for just three types of criminals and no others: those who abused children, those who raped, and those who committed bestiality. When he paid his tribute as a sign of submission, he demanded and received—at least one time out of three—a gift that he proudly displayed to his council.

He was a monarch standing tall and proud. And he intended to remain so.

He concluded all public ceremonies with a ritual phrase, a poetic flourish meant to be unequivocal: "The cock has two knees, clearly, but no one has ever seen him bend like a dog to beg for a kernel of corn."

That morning, as he tried to reason with his brother, with whom he'd long had a stormy relationship, the king confided that he had consulted his oracle. Several days earlier, when the truth-telling shells were cast, the elder charged with communicating with the spirits of our ancestors had made a prophecy: Soon there would rise in Léopoldville a man who was ordinary in appearance alone. The stranger named Lumumba, from the Tetela ethnic group, would piss on the designs of Baudouin I, the young Belgian king. He'd cover the Belgian yoke in shit. The spirits foretold that this Lumumba would speak out as a prophet, calling on all people throughout Congo to stand tall and proud, to bow down no more. The Black prophet would have no weapons other than the words that sprang from his heart of hearts, inspiring words from the depths of his tormented soul. Words of hope. Words of fire that would ignite the coals beneath the occupiers' rags. Words of liberation, greater than thunder. All of Africa would hear his resonant voice. The Black nation would tremble.

"The day will come when the land of Kongo will grow drunk on his blood, even as the scarlet dawn of Liberty rises on the horizon. But before the fatal blow that will put an end to the black night of submission, the sweat of his brow will mix with the flood waters of the river of Dignity. The canopy of the sacred forest—profaned long ago by the scoundrel named Stanley^[1]—will grow green, lush, majestic once more."

The king exhorted Prince Osako to bide his time. Wait until the rhymes of the Sacred Chorus of Our Warriors' Blood announced the prophet's arrival. He implored him not to enroll in the Public Force, the occupier's military arm, not to fight in a war that was not their own. Leave it to the whites and the whites alone to undo that knot. Or to die trying. Would the hippopotamus watching the waters of his fluvial sanctuary dry up sacrifice himself by rushing headlong into the duel between the buffalo and the elephant?

"I fear that your great wisdom ends where my little glimmer of understanding begins, Kena Kwete III, son of my mother. It may seem like

madness to you, but the white men's wars are truly ours."

"I am your brother who saw the sun before you, and so became your king, Osako. If Nsapu Nsapu and his lackeys rise up from their ashes to mock us again, nothing would be nobler than for you to lead our men into battle. But tell me, for what cause are you willing to sacrifice yourself? Why bare your breast to the gunfire of that foreign monarch? We've no quarrel with him!"

"The Belgians are the enemies of the Germans. The Belgian Congo belongs to Belgium just as yesterday the Congo Free State was a gift Léopold II gave himself. You know that full well because Dufour's successor and his masters in Léopoldville are plotting to take away your title of king. Soon they'll take the status of kingdom away from the land along the Sankuru River, so that Mushenge, where our great royal totem abides and our people's most significant ceremonies take place, will be a capital no more."

"Just words!"

"If only! It's been years now since the Belgians laid down a law and cut our kingdoms into shameful little scraps of chiefdoms. And just who now sits atop each of the chiefdoms that surround us? A pitiful minion who owes allegiance only to Bula Matari."

"That's all just bat shit. Nothing that would worry a resting lion."

"Our grandfather was an absolute monarch. The spear in his hand and the eagle feathers in his headdress proclaimed his omnipotence to the far corners of the world. You're no more than a wren biding your time, Kena Kwete III. Didn't you say it yourself? The waters that used to serve as your sanctuary continue to dry up, siphoned off by those stronger than you and me together. Unless you create an alliance with the powerful Mwant Yav, King of the Lunda, you're condemned—your illusion of power will last no longer than the lives of ten gnats lined up one after the other. Oh, son of my mother who hopes to hide his nakedness from the river by diving into its waters, wake up before it's too late!"

Yes, the prince mocked his king. The younger brazenly challenged his elder. Egged on by his own insolence, the scoundrel poked his finger at the

reddened eye of the one who, twenty-six years earlier, had been his mother's firstborn.

"I am who I am and there will never come a day when I will be the miserable lout the White Man claims I am. Kena Kwete III, son of Mingashang Kwete II, descendant of the Valiant Sovereign Woto—that's who I am. My land is a kingdom whose glory was sung by all that breathes on the lands along the Kasai and the Sankuru, long before the White Man ever felt the need to record it in his writing. Do I need to remind you of that, Osako the Walking Coward?"

"In this fight between the White Man and you, a dying sun who believes his salvation lies in insults and bluster, only one kingdom will prevail: Belgium."

"Just words!"

"Soon there will only be one king: Baudouin I. You talk of posterity? We've crawled on our bellies since the day some of our monarchs stomped on the wisdom of our elders and ceded our lands to the White Man who'd landed on our shores. Since the dawn of time, their wisdom taught us to lend clothes to the stranger, even offer him a bed, but never, never give him your wife. Because once he's enjoyed that wife of yours, the stranger will impregnate her and then not even the most talented of sorcerers will be able to save you from your fate. Nothing and no one will be able to rid your wife's womb of the stranger's seed—and that's the truth, the one and only. That's when, where, and to whom we lost the most decisive round of the battle, Kena Kwete III. The land, nourishing mother of our great-grandchildren, was ceded to the White Man, who immediately planted the seeds of our servitude. As for your oracle, that's just smoke and mirrors, nothing more—there's no use beating around the bush. An Otetela by the name of Lumumba? With all due respect to our friends the missionaries, you'll wait for him just like those who go to catechism wait for the arrival on our lands of the charlatan they say walked on the waters of the Jordan River."

"So says the Kuba prince who sold his soul to the missionaries' God! And now this mountain of muscles that only a woman would mistake for

proof of virility—the shameful coward my mother ought never to have brought into this world—dares scorn and mock a true descendant of Woto!”

The blow was resounding.

By laying a hand on his brother, the king had lost his self-control. And for the first time in the history of the Bakubas, a royal prince did not remain stoic after receiving a blow from a furious monarch. For the first time since the royal totem and the Moshambwooy mask first sanctified the words and deeds of our enlightened guides, a subject struck back at his sovereign in his own palace.

In the heart of power.

Sacrilege, my Ndoyi. Sacrilege. To put an end to it before the news spread throughout the Kuba land, a third party had to intervene. To forestall the irreparable. My mother, the only witness to the confrontation, forgot her place. Eight months pregnant, my mother rushed from her hut to the brothers and tried to intercede. She threatened to expose herself on the Grand Square of Palavers, wearing almost nothing. Neither of them paid her the slightest attention. My mother forgot about me—and risked the worst. She was hit in the wrong spot, Nyota. Her water broke. The midwives came running. And right behind them, the priestesses swathed in protective fetishes and bearing the Bombo mask.

I gave my first cry in the minutes that followed. At that very moment, in the Bena Nyimi forest, a young prince who had in the six years since his initiation earned a reputation as a pitiful hunter, captured a parrot the size of a royal eagle.

I was born feetfirst. A child destined to bring bad luck in war. An eyewitness to the Bakuba king’s loss of honor. A king at once humiliated and mortified by the cowardice of his own blood. That didn’t stop the Nyimi from adding his paternal benediction when he held me in his arms for the first time, an incantation I’d remember nineteen years later, while walking in Heysel Park in Brussels: “Because the world welcomed you this day as a witness to the unforgivable, you will be a man, my daughter!”

—

I'd have to wait until 1957, the year I turned eighteen, before the poison of that affront to honor on the day of my birth caught up to me.

Several years before that, when arid days gave way to seasonal rains and the sky shed the tears necessary for our harvest, and as I left the fields of childhood to savor the scent of youth's wildflowers, people began remarking on my appearance. At that time when Christian faith worked its way into everything all around, brusquely sweeping aside the myths and legends we had believed were engraved on the stars, my supposed beauty, over which I had not the least control, was deemed in turn divine or diabolical: "Tshala Nyota, the king's youngest, is not just on the edge of womanhood—make no mistake about it. A true menace against peace and tranquility. A hurricane brewing over the lands along the Kasai and the Sankuru."

A little song in our language made its way to my ears, although I had no idea whose lips might have whispered it to the unthinking and enthusiastic crowd:

*To escape from the billions of eyes
That night after night
Demand from the skies
The secret of her splendor
A handful of stars
Sought refuge, it's true,
In the depths of the eyes
Of Princess Tshala.
What shall we say,
My friends here today,
What shall we do?
Please answer me that
And then tell the cock
So he sings to us all 'ere daybreak.*

Then there were all sorts of rumors about the rare bird to whom my father, who could be a magnanimous and kindly ruler when he wanted, would one day offer my hand.

My hand for an alliance.

Following tradition, it was Aunt Mengi, my mother's eldest sister, who, on the day after my first menstruation, came to speak to me about that rare bird. The chosen one, I would learn, was the young Lunda prince. Five years older than I, he'd been sent to the little seminary of the Scheut missionaries, until his father and monarch, Mwant Yav, changed his mind after quarreling with the bishop of his diocese. My father had long harbored dreams of an alliance with the powerful Mwant Yav, which would enhance his standing vis-à-vis the new governor general of the Belgian Congo; now he saw me as the invaluable currency needed for the trade.

My hand for the promise of a new lease on life.

Aunt Mengi's eyes sparkled with joy. Although I was just thirteen, she sold me a story about "the marriage that'll be the talk of all the Belgian Congo, from Thysville at the river's mouth to Élisabethville at the source of the Lualaba, and even in the capital Léopoldville."

"I'm still in school, Aunt Mengi. The sisters say I'm a model student and that's why they love me so. Just the other day, Mother Superior, Sister Marie-Clémentine, said that I'm the woman our country will need 'when Congo's destiny falls to its daughters and sons.' "

"Do you want to be a model student who swallows everything the sisters say or a princess who honors her dynasty?"

"Even if Sister Marie-Clémentine hadn't said that, I'm not interested in boys."

"The sisters chose to offer their breasts and vaginas to their God. I'm not going to give them a lecture about it, no more than I expect to hear one from their mouths. But if your father, my king, balked at sending you to catechism, it was mainly to keep you away from their nonsense."

"It's not nonsense, Aunt Mengi. You should give at least a little listen to the Holy Scriptures."

“That’s the last thing we need: a daughter of Nyimi advising the bee to listen to the fly who says that shit is better than nectar. Nonsense or not, whatever those women who’ve never spread their thighs to honor life think is none of my business. My duty is to prepare you, the princess, to prove yourself worthy of your father the king, of your mother the queen, and of all the Kuba people with a most brilliant marriage. A marriage that will allow your kingdom to continue on the path traced in the stars by Bumba Chembe, the Creator.”

Then she began telling me how Bakuba women had always been the beating heart of the monarchy. That under the reign of Woto, Son of the Sky and Earth, who is reincarnated in each of his successors, Woman was accorded one of the most significant roles. The founding king taught her to make fire with friction, which made her a pillar of our society. A society that would embrace matriarchy, thanks to the twelfth sovereign who rewarded his eldest daughter for covering him with a *pagne* after a day of much drinking by naming her children his successors—and thus disinheriting his own male offspring.

That’s how Woman became our rising sun.

Aunt Mengi explained how this matrilineal line ended up burying the patriarchy, as you can see from the kingdom’s long line of queen mothers and regents. One of those emblematic women, Queen Mother Ngokady, of blessed and eternal memory, known for her role in the creation of our artistic tradition, made blacksmiths and sculptors the standard-bearers of the kingdom’s prestige—of the entire people, according to my aunt. We owe it primarily to her, my aunt confided, that the reputation of Kuba statuary has spread far and wide, reaching the distant American skies of the missionary William Sheppard, and even Germany, against which Prince Osako was determined to fight. An art recognized as unequalled in all sub-Saharan Africa by the travelers who quickly grew interested in our heritage—and

who, going from one extravagant theory to the next, even suggested our origins lay in the distant lands of the Pharaohs.

Carried away by her own enthusiasm, Aunt Mengi revealed how some of our male brethren, nostalgic for the order of bygone days, took advantage of a random event to advance the theory that women were unable to exercise official functions at certain times, which then extended into never at all. She confided that one fine day, one of our queen mothers began to bleed right in the middle of a council meeting—something that did not escape the notice of those ruffians. From secret meetings to conspiracies, those hostile to the long-standing influence of the matriarchs in the kingdom's affairs took advantage of that event—something no more significant, really, than a little fart—to exact revenge and undo decades of concord.

One world was coming to a close. Another, shadowy and pitiless, was unfolding.

For my mother's eldest sister, even if our people hadn't managed to preserve the beautiful harmony between men and women initiated by our past queen mothers, the turmoil caused by the arrival of the White Man on our lands did nothing to slow our headlong dash toward the darkest of uncertainties. It now fell to our princes to prove themselves worthy heirs to our Valiant Sovereign Woto, Founder of the Kuba Kingdom, while the princesses upheld the example of those legendary women of the past who brought honor to the Nyimi dynasty.

No goats among the lion's offspring.

To conclude, Aunt Mengi turned to a maxim I'd heard more than once during my initiation: "Night and day the river flows toward its mouth. Whoever stands on the shore hoping to see the torrent flow back toward its source has understood nothing of the rumbling of the mountains."

"I know the name Tshala Nyota was given to me so I would remember in what direction the river of our epic flows. If it's any reassurance to you, know that I will not bring shame to the sacred mountains where our forebears watch over me. Do you doubt me, my aunt?"

“No one doubts you, Tshala Nyota Moelo, my niece. You are thirteen. Your father promised the Lunda king that your marriage to the young prince Mwanza would take place at the start of the dry season that marks your eighteenth year. Of course, the nuns, your good sisters, will be invited to the big celebration, along with the district and territorial administrators.”

There was no use fighting.

My father held to his honor as to his royal totem. He held to the grandeur of his kingdom, which he could not imagine withering away, becoming just an obscure chiefdom lost in the depths of the Belgian Congo. According to my mother and my aunt, the only man who could have held firm against him had left to test himself against an enemy both formidable and nebulous. The territorial administrator let my father know that Prince Osako’s travels had taken him to Abyssinia. There, my father was told, the men of the Public Forces and their allies from the four corners of the world would wage the mother of all battles against not the Germans but the Italians. My father did not try to understand what sleight of hand on the part of the enemy had led to the replacement of the enemy his brother had gone to fight with this other—equally distant and equally inscrutable.

He had other worries.

Beneath his bellicose mask, King Kena Kwete III was transforming into an impetuous river. But I could scarcely imagine that I would be carried away by that river like a swallow’s feather surrendered to the fury of the elements. Not when I was thirteen nor even five years later. Since my only obsession was graduating from the good sisters’ school with the best possible grades, I shut my ears and my eyes, blocking out what I knew to be futile and letting time conjure the unthinkable: the love of my life.

[SKIP NOTES](#)

1. Henry Morton Stanley, born John Rowlands, a British journalist and explorer. In 1878 Léopold II gave him the mission of acquiring, as the king’s personal property, the lands that would later become the Congo Free State from 1885 to 1908.

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His name was René. René Comhaire.

The first time I saw him, I was in the Notre-Dame chapel with all the other students at Sainte-Marie-de-la-Miséricorde. Sister Marie-Clémentine Bayet, our Mother Superior, was teaching us new songs in preparation for a visit from the bishop of Luebo, Monsignor Paul Goethals. Outside, an incandescent sun was meandering toward the savanna's flank, tracing massive and misshapen shadows beneath the trees and buildings. It was one of those days that, although just like all the others, somehow crystallize in our memory, such that we recall even the slight purr of the breeze across the grass fields.

One year before, thanks to the intervention of Aunt Mengi—who was trying to get me to agree to the arranged marriage—I'd gotten my father's permission to attend the boarding school in the regional capital. I made the case that living in the dormitory for my last two years would allow me to master the latest sewing techniques. My family knew that designing clothes no longer held any secrets for me—and hadn't for quite a while.

It wasn't easy, but the Nyimi allowed himself to be convinced, even as he warned my unlikely ally: If any misfortune resulted from my staying in the neighboring town, he'd hold Aunt Mengi personally responsible. Coming from the mouth of King Kena Kwete III, that was a serious threat. All I'd had to do was swear on the head of our deceased queen mother Ngokady that I'd behave perfectly. That I'd go to Luebo fully aware of the respect I owed to ancestral traditions, as well as to the draconian rules of the Sisters of Notre-Dame. My aunt responded with a glare that silently sealed

a pact of solidarity between us—any betrayal would expose each of us to his royal fury.

I needed to remain, at all times, that river flowing toward its mouth without ever attempting to retrace its course.

A year passed as we followed our mundane routine. I divided my time between the lessons taught by the good sisters, who wanted to make us “well-behaved future wives, but also women who’d contribute to the Congo of tomorrow,” and catechism. Despite my father’s clear reservations, I insisted on diving into the Holy Bible—how I’d longed to read it myself! Honestly, the stories I’d heard from some of my friends in Mushenge had piqued my curiosity enough that I was eager for more. Like the one about the Jewish woman who became pregnant even though she’d never slept with her fiancé, who—curiously—made no complaints about that, then adopted the child of a total stranger and did his best to make an honest carpenter of him. Or that king who sent the servant whose wife he lusted after to war, hoping he’d be killed by someone more valiant than himself. Or that other king who decided a conflict between two women over a newborn in the most unexpected of ways: by proposing that they cut the baby in half. Just as we’d cut a manioc root in two before rinsing it in the stream.

Or course I kept silent about this breach of contract whenever I spoke to my family. While they pressed me with all sorts of questions whenever I returned to the court, I just shared various anecdotes that made them smile or sigh and shake their heads, depending on the subject. So my mother, cousins, and aunts burst out laughing when I told them about the boys from the school of the Jesuit Fathers, which was right across from the church. We watched them marching in tightly formed ranks and singing, at the top of their lungs in all the different dialects of Kasai:

*We’d be the slaves of the Arabized
But the Belgians saved us.
We’d still be living in darkness
But the Belgians brought us light.*

La la la la
La la la la.

Or this other round:

Once we were idiots
Our days full of vice
Our feet full of chiggers
Our heads full of lice
Thank you reverend fathers.

With her usual insolence and a laugh that made her generous bosom jiggle, my mother replied: “They’re really incredible, those Belgians of yours! Maybe we were idiots, but we’re not the ones who chose as our god a grudge-holder who prides himself on roasting his own children in eternal flames.”

—

The first time I saw René Comhaire, Sister Marie-Clémentine was teaching us a song I’ve never forgotten: “*Le monde ancien s’en est allé*”—“The old world has passed away.” While we were repeating the refrain for the umpteenth time, without satisfying Sister Marie-Clémentine’s finely tuned ear, a younger nun came into the chapel, Sister Perpétue—whom we all secretly called “Sister Please Pass Her Two Tits.” She whispered something to our choir director, whose face suddenly froze.

The district administrator himself had just arrived at the convent and would come into the chapel at any moment. Sister Marie-Clémentine explained that Monsieur René Comhaire, for that was his name, wanted to be certain that preparations for the upcoming visit of Monsignor Paul Goethals were proceeding with the utmost seriousness. Mother Superior added that Monsieur Comhaire was responsible for ensuring that this visit be the most memorable event of 1957 in all the dioceses of Kasai district.

She hoped it would be the talk of Léopoldville, as well as Brussels and throughout the metropole.

The Belgian dignitary arrived half an hour later, without an escort. He had the fortune of listening to sixteen native girls, daughters of the local aristocracy, for the most part, drone through liturgical chants as the dimming rays of the setting sun slipped between the arches of the cloister, casting long shadows across the Notre-Dame chapel. So many litanies, he'd later confess, reminded him of his tender youth in Namur, where he was born. Before leaving in his black car—so shiny it seemed to have come straight from the factory—the Belgian did something I wouldn't really understand until several weeks later. After heartily congratulating us on having “the most beautiful voices in the whole colony” and then bowing slightly as he shook Sister Marie-Clémentine's hand, he turned and retraced his steps.

As if filtered through a diaphanous veil, the rays of the setting sun illuminated the chapel, all but empty after the choir's departure. In the distance, a cock's final crow rose over the murmur of the wind and the fluttering of bat wings, calling on women to put away their mortars and pestles and begin preparing the evening meal. As you can see, I'll never forget that moment.

He walked to the prie-dieu that separated the altar from the sacristy and approached me and my friend Kisita, who was holding my hand. Monsieur Comhaire then spoke to me in words swathed in mystery and plunged his strangely blue eyes into my own: “I saw you for the first time a week ago. I was passing by the school and you were sitting beneath the main gate with your friend there. I've just learned your name is Tshala. A melodious name. Mother Superior sang your praises. As for me, I've never seen such riches in the eyes of any woman in this country—so many promises of sensuality and intelligence—as I discover in this moment.”

Vertigo.

I stepped back, trying to escape from the confusion welling up inside me. My friend turned on her heels and ran, but René Comhaire grasped my hand—a gesture both firm and tender. He spoke slowly, clearly: “Innocence

is beautiful and relaxing, young lady. But it is nothing—really, truly nothing—when compared to the wings that come from a knowledge of one’s own body, from listening to one’s own senses, from wild abandon. I am certain our paths will cross again soon. I live just fifteen minutes from here. But next time, it will not be the district administrator René Comhaire who addresses Tshala. It will be Kunyaza—my double, if you will.”

He smiled, caressed my left cheek with the back of his hand, then turned to walk away, rejoining Mother Superior, still standing by his car. Intrigued by what had happened, troubled by the words I’d just heard, I stood speechless and still.

Unable to put one foot in front of the other.

Several minutes later, my friend Kisita came back to the chapel. She wrested me from my daze.

“He...you...”

“Yes, he touched my cheek.”

“That white man who makes everyone tremble, that white man who, with a snap of his fingers, could tell all the Blacks in Luebo to throw themselves in the Kasai and be obeyed...He caressed your cheek. He left the scent of his perfume on you. That white man said—I heard him myself—that this was the first time he’d seen in a Negress’s eyes the sun, moon, and stars—”

“He never said that, Kisita! You always exaggerate.”

“He never said those insipid words, it’s true. His were far more beautiful, more powerful, more dangerous. Why has no one—no man, no boy—ever said even one of those words to me? My eyes aren’t beautiful enough? My breasts not big enough? Tell me, Tshala. You can tell me.”

I didn’t know what to say to Kisita. I really didn’t want to say that she could’ve challenged Sister Perpétue Malingreau for the unflattering nickname of Please Pass Her Two Tits—no joke! But if she was poorly endowed in that area, my friend had other qualities I lacked, notably her prodigious knowledge of the Nyimi epic.

We walked back to the cafeteria where the cooks, our kitchen mamas, were serving the evening meal. Before we went to evening prayers, I made

my friend promise never to tell a soul about the words that had come out of the district administrator's mouth.

I trusted Kisita, completely.

The following weeks were sheer anguish. What had gotten into that man? What did he think he knew about me? And was he really so handsome or had he just cast a spell so he'd impress me? Why did he give himself an African name—especially one from some other faraway place?

I struggled to understand what this Kunyaza—who was not Bula Matari's representative, not René Comhaire—could want with a girl who'd just turned eighteen. Each hypothesis, Nyota, my niece, was wilder, more implausible than the last. Still, day after day, those words, which had not come from any dream, echoed and thundered deep within me. Kisita had heard them, too—at least she'd heard a part of his speech.

The unspeakable part.

The idea that the district administrator—I should say, the representative of King Baudouin I, who'd visited our colony two years before—had been so swayed by my charms that he desired my body, me a Negress, only barely surfaced in my mind before it crashed into a truth of a very different order. René Comhaire was, admittedly, rather young—just thirty-two, far younger than the commander of Luebo (an awful fat man who refused to use a car, preferring to travel only by *tipoye*,^[1] even when in town). I knew I was beautiful: I'd been told as much, but never really thought about it. That wasn't the real question. Between him and me, there were a thousand and one mountains—a barrier high enough to contain any utopian fantasies I might dream up. The highest of those mountains was, of course, skin color.

The insurmountable part.

A border set in stone—inscribed in the laws that everyone in the Belgian Congo, whether white or Black, rich or poor, had to respect. In Luebo and the provincial capital of Luluabourg, as in all towns across the country, the masters kept to themselves, lived in neighborhoods reserved for them. Native servants went about their lives on the other side of the wall—

at once visible and invisible—that split the city in two. Work was the only place where they mixed, and only according to rigidly observed schedules.

That's the way nature wanted things since the dawn of time: Oil floats on water. The white man is destined for the white woman, the Negress for the Negro. This parallel truth—both simple and clear-cut—was supposed to ensure sexual peace and, thereby, peace, pure and simple. A delicate balance, to be sure, but necessary. Of course, a thousand and one rumors flew about some white man who'd compromised himself with a female servant or the wife of a male servant, but in a place like this, where nothing was appreciated more than the sweet scent of scandal, who could tell truth from fiction?

All those thoughts kept haunting me, growing ever more pressing. I started to dream of the handsome stranger with glimmering hair and words that were both honey-sweet and mysterious. Incredibly, those same thoughts began to worm their way into my mind during my home economics lessons. During religious services. During those hours spent working in the convent's gardens. I'd just shut my eyes—at any time, day or night—and the Belgian's wonderfully intense gaze would swath me in an exquisite sweetness. One evening, when a torrential rain poured down on the town, I—who'd never in my life seen a male member engorged with desire—I caught myself committing a sin the sisters had warned us about time and time again: the forbidden and oh so dizzying voyage to the land of “delicious touches.”

The handsome stranger had gotten under my skin, and threw me into a solitary adventure that fulfilled and frustrated me equally. It left me wanting more; it had on my desires the same effect as drinking herbal tea when you're craving something else.

It always happened at night, in the dormitory, once Sister Please Pass Her Two Tits, I mean, Sister Perpétue, had finished her rounds and retired for the night. I'd close my eyes and slip my fingers down there—oh, what ecstasy! Like the sparks that fly when a blade strikes the whetstone. I called on René Comhaire-Kunyaza. His eyes drenched with mystery. His warm, hoarse voice. His delicate hands. The scent of his body which, strangely,

was not the same he'd left on my cheek and that my friend kept talking about. They were my fingers, but it was René Comhaire–Kunyaza's touch. My murmurs, but René Comhaire–Kunyaza whispering the most wonderful things a girl ever heard. And my chest erupted, releasing the flames of my volcanic flesh.

Shivers.

In my daydreams, the stranger calmed my fears and wrapped me up in his grand folly; his eyes fixed between my thighs; his turgid member opened me up to the devouring flames; his impatience traced cabalistic signs on the damp palm of my innocence. To hell with the future! Our destiny was intoxicating. Nothing less than a paradise where he and I would test the limits of blasphemy and banish God himself. That's why, once I weighed the seriousness of my sin, I thought of confessing to Father Joseph, who came each Friday evening to Notre-Dame chapel. I swept that idea far from my mind by recalling the bewitching words of the phantom; I fell in love with the sweet voice of the serpent who maligned Yahweh in the Garden of Eden. Words that conjured but did not name the body, chains, and freedom.

Intoxicating and perilous words.

But there were also melancholy days when another voice sounded within me, insisting it was time to escape the accursed garden: "You're being held hostage by a hallucination. The district administrator never set foot in Sainte-Marie-de-la-Miséricorde school. He never spoke to you except in your fantasies. His name is René Comhaire and not Kunyaza—that nickname means nothing at all."

But then, despite the provocative lessons we'd been given during our initiation about "the thousand and one secrets to keep a man in a wedding bed and on a tight leash," just what did I really know about the sexual act, that mortal sin proscribed before marriage by the Holy Bible? Was it wise to risk getting burned here on earth, as happened in Gomorrah, and then for all eternity in Lucifer's realm?

Then came Monsignor Paul Goethals.

The visit was marked by great fanfare. The sisters saw to every detail, spared no expense. The prelate arrived at our school in a car, having refused the *tipoye* proposed by the traditional chiefs, as ordered by the commander of Luebo. A blue Citroën sedan. No trace of administrator René Comhaire. He'll come later, I told myself when the first hosannas signaled the start of Mass in the chapel. But how I suffered when, at the end of the Eucharist, the monsignor blessed us all and congratulated the choir for an "exceptional performance." My fears were confirmed: This was not the day my path would again cross that of the most powerful Belgian in the district.

Maybe he really didn't exist, after all.

Maybe it was the town commander now accompanying Monsignor Paul Goethals who'd come to the school three weeks earlier. My overflowing imagination had turned his misshapen silhouette, his bowed legs, bushy mustache, and that nasal voice—which shouted at those serving during Mass, "Let Monsignor leave, you little cassock-wearing brutes!"—into the divinity of my sleepless nights. Time to come back to earth. If I couldn't replace my daydreams with Aunt Mengi's grand nuptial fantasy, I still needed to bring this year to a triumphant close.

And that's when René Comhaire reappeared at the end of my long night.

He'd just learned that the bright flowers in the courtyard behind the convent's main building, which he glimpsed from the main street on his way to the presbytery each morning, owed their splendor to the delicate touch of the girls in the senior class. He crossed the street and knocked at the Mother Superior's door. He asked Sister Marie-Clémentine for "two girls of good family, with good manners, well-kempt, not inclined to theft, and who spoke French fairly well," to tend to the flowers he was desperately trying to grow in his garden. He wasn't satisfied with the care his *boy* gave to his blooms, an assortment of primarily torch ginger, canna lilies, passiflora, hibiscus, and frangipani.

I never knew if it was by chance that Sister Marie-Clémentine chose my friend and me; she'd always shown a true affection for me and was well aware of my long-standing friendship with Kisita. We were to go to the

administrator's residence, just a short fifteen-minute walk from the sisters' convent and school, between two and five each Saturday afternoon. We would tend the garden of the Belgian dignitary, under the supervision of his boy, a young and overly shy Luba youth, only a little older than I. We'd be back inside the gates of the Sisters of Notre-Dame before evening prayer, or risk a punishment that could include being expelled from school, along with a number of heavy fines to be paid by our parents.

An excursion into the lair of the beast.

René Comhaire didn't wait for our second visit before revealing his intentions. Just a few minutes after we arrived, while Kisita and I were waiting for the servant to bring us the tools we needed and explain just what the master wanted, the master himself appeared. He told us that for this first visit, he had a different idea, other tasks he wanted to assign us, provisionally at least. We'd get to work on the garden the following week; he was waiting for more tools to be sent from Léopoldville.

Then he dragged my friend off to a little shed filled with all sorts of bric-a-brac; he wanted her to sort pieces of craftwork from a dozen or so bags of various sizes into three metal trunks. The wooden sculptures in the first trunk, ivory in the second, and, lastly, textiles, including a collection of velvet rugs made by Kuba weavers, in the third. Peering at the room through the partially open door, I thought it would take her all night.

Then he asked me to follow him.

My heart was pounding as I entered that private chamber where the most powerful man in town could let down his guard, remove the public mask that imposed law and order in the name of Bula Matari. Before I could open my mouth to ask the question burning my lips, he made the first move. He asked if I remembered the "promise made" several weeks before that my path would soon cross that of Monsieur Kunyaza, his double. I took him literally and asked him about the origin of that name, which certainly didn't come from his native Belgium, nor from any tribe found on the lands between the Kasai and the Sankuru.

Monsieur René Comhaire came closer to me, plunged his eyes into mine, as he had that day in Notre-Dame chapel. After several seconds, a

strange sensation flooded through my body, starting with the tips of my hands and my feet, before moving to my hips, and then all over—something I'd never felt before in my life. My throat was dry, I couldn't breathe, my hands were clammy, drops of sweat pearled on my brow and began to run down between my breasts and under my arms.

A desire to stop time.

A burning desire to melt under the pressure of the two hands that had clamped around my hips, a show of both strength and precaution. Unless it was all that and more, because my heart was pounding like a drum given over to the frenzy of a madman.

My head was spinning.

Hard to say if he lifted me in his arms or if he just snapped his fingers. There I was, spread out on the big bed, on top of a silky plaid bedspread, naked as a newly plucked guinea hen. René Comhaire-Kunyaza, who was still fully dressed, began to drum out a beat on my skin, a rhythm impossible to describe with words. Nothing like what I'd imagined over those last weeks when my thoughts chased after his shadow. His warm mouth, avid and impetuous, improvised a ballet on my breasts, my inner thighs. My whole body began to tremble as indescribable shocks raced across my lower belly and my sex grew wet, without even the slightest touch.

At once both torture and release.

Within those four walls adorned with impassive masks, I was a cathedral filled with muffled convulsions.

René's fingers opened the way for a thousand and one liquid flames, his breath taught my hips a rumba that verged on unbearable—where heat becomes honey and anticipation, torture.

I had dreamed of Eden; René plucked it from the Reverend Father Joseph's mouth and offered it to me on a platter.

While I panted and bit my lower lip to hold back the whirlwind threatening to make me lose all self-control, his left hand took over for his lips, which were then free to whisper into the hollow of my ear. From the mists where my spirit floated between wonder and doubt, a flood of words

reached me, painfully, slowly. As if he feared seeing the coals aglow with the fury and madness of a stormy night go out.

He told me that before landing in my kingdom, he'd followed in his grandfather's footsteps, crisscrossing the continent. Far, far from the Sankuru's plains and plateaus. Like his grandfather, he added, he'd fallen in love with Africa in the cradle of mankind, where green hills bow only to the shores of the most beautiful lakes. There, in another Black kingdom, he'd adopted the nickname of Kunyaza. That's what he wanted me to call him when we were together, if he were lucky enough to offer me what he'd hoped from the very first moment he set eyes on me.

"But first, I must tell you the secret behind Kunyaza, since I know those three syllables intrigue you. Here's the secret, my marvelous Tshala: Long, long ago, in the time before time, there lived in the kingdom of Rwanda a queen as beautiful as those born at the foot of the hills of that intoxicating country can be. This queen had sexual desires as broad and deep as the oceans. Maybe more—but that didn't keep her from living happy and content. Except when her husband was gone for long periods, something that happened, alas, fairly regularly. One day when she was alone in her palace, overcome with a desire that had consumed the candle of her patience, the queen asked one of her slaves to satisfy her. The slave obeyed, but was unable to control the panic and fear welling up within him as he accomplished his dangerous mission. The young man trembled as he grabbed hold of his sex, engorged with desire, and touched it to that of his venerated mistress. The vibrations provoked in her by the trembling of the penis caressing her pleasure bud set loose such a sensation that the queen began to ejaculate wildly. The warm liquid that sprayed from her satisfied slit gave birth to Lake Kivu, a lake you must have learned about in your geography lessons.

"Of course, I've never tried to reproduce the miracle of the Tutsi slave, but there's only one thing I've dreamed of these past weeks: following the path of Kunyaza and releasing you from the prison of your innocence. For I never stop thinking of you, Tshala. Night and day. Wherever I go. Can I

keep waiting? If you insist that I walk the Via Dolorosa all the way to Golgotha, I will bow to your wishes. I—”

I came out of my stupor and, with an audacity I did not know I possessed—though it still makes me smile—put an end to his boring monologue. Since the man of Golgotha thought himself so gifted and burned with the desire to share his hidden talents with me, why was he wasting so much saliva? I slipped my hand into his underwear and, with a gesture he could not misunderstand, let him know he needed to back up those words that were driving me wild with the only action that mattered.

What more can I say, except that on that day, René Comhaire pulled off the famous miracle of the Tutsi slave. He led me through the clouds covering his bedroom floor along a brilliant and unimagined path. Without actually taking my virginity—I didn’t yet feel prepared for that final transgressive step and was grateful he knew that intuitively. And so he earned the nickname that always made him smile from ear to ear whenever I used it, when we found ourselves as naked as the day our mothers first embraced us.

If God is out there somewhere in the far reaches of the universe, he surely saw in my eyes, brimming with happiness, my endless gratitude to him for having created the kingdom of Rwanda.

[SKIP NOTES](#)

[1.](#) A sedan chair carried on the shoulders of four usually robust porters; a means of transport reserved for dignitaries and honored guests among peoples in the Congo basin.

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Born again.

Not in the flames of the Holy Spirit but in the waters of Lake Kivu. Weeks quickly turned into months, setting the rhythm for our work at the district administrator's residence. Tedium for my friend Kisita, who spent half the time we had each Saturday working in the garden and the other half sorting through the pile of objects our host set out for her. Moments of pure bliss for me, shut away between two and five in the afternoon with my man so I could experience *kunyaza*. Enjoy its revelations in an ever-expanding Lake Kivu. Each time I left our alcove, I left behind fully soaked sheets. As if we'd used one of those aluminum sprinkling cans that René's *boy* set out for my friend to water the flowers.

For eighteen, almost nineteen years, I'd been a stranger to myself—a stranger desired by throngs of men, most of whom lacked balls. A woman becoming a fountain? A phenomenon I'd never heard of before I met René. A discovery that fascinated and troubled me equally. As for my man, he was deliriously happy. He said he'd never imagined that there was a girl here in the Belgian Congo just waiting to confirm once and for all that “the heart of the most devoted of white men has reasons that colonial reason ignores.” He showered me with gifts: undergarments, deodorants, bars of chocolate, cookies, and all sorts of sweets that I shared with Kisita. He also offered me beautiful brightly colored notebooks that I refused to take back to the dormitory for fear of catching the eye of my fellow students or, worse, the sisters.

Good fortune.

I was quite surprised to discover that, although our relationship had been going on for weeks, René was unaware I was my father's daughter. That detail seemed to upset him more than anything. His eyes turned from blue to ash gray as I watched him snuff out cigarette after cigarette, barely lighting one before grabbing another. He stressed that he'd never wanted to get on the wrong side of the Bakuba king, whom he'd rather have as an ally than an enemy. I promised again to protect our secret and swore that I had full confidence in my friend. My confidence in Kisita, and his in his *boy*, calmed his misgivings. Then one afternoon, as I was leaving to return to school, he stared into my eyes and said he loved me. That was the first and only time in my life I heard a man speak those words, which no man should utter to a woman unless he's quite sure he'd sacrifice his soul for her.

If happiness is faceless, that's because it doesn't want to be recognized by those it leaves on the sidelines.

Then everything went wrong. After a Christmas holiday that seemed endless because of how I missed my man, I allowed René to take us out on waters far more tumultuous than those of our peaceful Lake Kivu.

Of course, this Rwandan *kunyaza* was a wondrous discovery that all men in the Kuba Kingdom should be taught during their initiation so that they, too, could fulfill their future wives. But my prince and I knew that the burning desire of our flesh—protected till then by the cherished discretion of Kisita and his *boy*—could not be satisfied by half measures. Sensing that I was finally ready to offer him my virginity, René whispered, "I see what your eyes want me to know right now, my beautiful, sweet Kuba princess: Once the wine is poured, it's time to drink."

And so we drank.

We drank our fill at last, but things didn't turn out as we'd hoped. First, I fell sick. For four days, I was wracked with a high fever, my whole body ached. I felt like I'd been run over by a car. I told the sister caring for me in the clinic that at the district administrator's home I'd eaten pangolin meat, which was forbidden by our customs, certain types of game being reserved for men alone. The Belgian nun almost died laughing, stunned that I still held on to "those beliefs shared by Beelzebub's children," despite my

devotion to catechism. She prescribed analgesics that I took back to the dormitory.

Not once during the four days I spent lying in the sickroom did Kisita come see how I was doing. If the sudden disappearance of my only school friend bothered me, I wanted to wait until I'd regained my strength before confronting her. Had she gotten sick, too? Did she blame me for using our assignment at René's home to discover the pleasures of sex, while she had to do alone the work the sisters expected us both to do for our powerful neighbor? Had I made a mistake by sharing the details of my sexual exploits with her? Her father was a notable who was dear to my father. My father had named him to one of the most prestigious positions in the kingdom: He was the *moaridi*, the official guardian of the oral traditions of the Kuba people. The memory-bearer. Kisita and I had grown up together, run naked in the rain, and played hide-and-seek during funeral wakes; we'd been part of the same initiation cohort and so had the same animal totem, a reminder of the circumstances of my arrival in the world: the wild parrot.

Did she feel humiliated?

I remembered Kisita's stony silence one evening when I asked, as we walked back from René's residence, if she'd had any news from her mother, who was suffering from sleeping sickness. When I pressed her for details, she revealed her exasperation, snapping that I didn't have to pretend to share her pain, since clearly all that mattered to me was my own happiness. That cut me to the quick and I let her know. She apologized profusely. Said she regretted her words. Declared she'd spoken without thinking, that she'd gone too far because she was trying to manage the pain she felt at being so far from home while her mother went from healer to healer with no visible results. I wondered for the first time if I'd made a wise choice when I spoke about kunyaza to a girl who knew nothing of sexual bliss.

If happiness is odorless, that's because it doesn't want to be noticed by those women it has overlooked, even though they were ready to wash its feet with their tears.

Abandoned outside the gate of my secret Eden, did Kisita want to make me pay for my selfish happiness?

My questions were answered with an unimaginable violence the morning I returned to class for a lesson on the metric system. I was heading to the corner where my friend was sitting when she rose and marched straight at me. As if her blistering glare weren't enough to let me know she was ready to have it out, she shouted, to be sure all the other students heard her, "What are you doing here, you pretty princess who plays the innocent each day at Sainte-Marie-de-la-Miséricorde and then offers her virginity to the district administrator once the sun has set?"

"Kisita!"

"Shut your mouth, you Bakuba princess!"

"What—"

"I'm the one asking questions here, okay? What was the sacred mask from the celebration of twins doing in your lover's bag? No woman can touch that mask, you know that full well. And I, Kisita, daughter of the *moaridi* named by King Kwete the Third himself, I touched that mask last Saturday. I touched that mask because neither you nor your man thought to warn me that, for some unknown reason, the foreigner had in his home a sacred object that's not supposed to leave the kingdom, just like that figurine of Queen Mother Ngokady hanging from your neck. You're the daughter of my king. If you'd warned me, I'd have been spared from the curse that's now sure to befall me—that is if my father can't calm the anger of the great totem's spirits."

"Kisita—"

"Never say my name again! I'm not a slut like you, princess of shame. I have no use for your farfetched ideas about freedom and who knows what other nonsense—do you hear me? I hope our king makes you regret your madness, you're a traitor who spits on her people and spreads her legs for a foreigner. And what foreigner! Some man who's still got a foreskin on the end of his dick—"

I raced out of the room.

I began to run, chased away by the shouts—whether real or imaginary, I cannot say—shouts that both made me want to run for my life and stopped me dead in my tracks. Exhausted, I collapsed at the base of the fountain

where the sister's pigeons came to drink. That's where Sister Please Pass Her Two Tits, Sister Perpétue, if you prefer, found me. She took me to the Mother Superior who, much to my surprise and for reasons I cannot fathom even today, did not, as I'd feared, directly address the secret Kisita had revealed but offered only these few oblique phrases: "For some time now, you've not been well, my daughter. Your grades have fallen, and you're often distracted in class and during activities, as if you were observing us from another planet. Even if you look well, I can tell something's just not right."

"I miss my mother, Sister. I miss my cousins. That's all."

"It's been less than a month since the Christmas holiday, but I've decided to let you return to your family this very evening—for a week. It will be up to me to sort things out so that you may return to your friends without each of your actions and gestures becoming the subject of schoolyard gossip. All I ask is that you never mention those tales of supposedly sacred masks and of who knows what sort of meat you and your friend might have eaten outside the canteen. Never. Not during your stay with the Bakuba king, nor after your return to Luebo one week from now. May the Holy Virgin watch over you and protect your faith in the Eucharist."

Do you believe that the Holy Virgin's love and my faith in the Eucharist kept my fate at bay? When your destiny is inscribed on the stars since the dawn of time, when you are no more than a cowry shell stripped of free will, caught in the twists and turns of a multcentury epic, it doesn't matter if you manage to slip away between the rocks, one day the invisible hand is sure to catch you.

—

I still don't know how King Kena Kwete III found out what had been going on for almost five months between René Comhaire and the only daughter his first wife had given him. Nevertheless, just as I arrived at the royal court, even before I had a chance to greet my father, my mother and

Aunt Mengi blocked my path, as if I were a criminal with a price Bula Matari had put on my head. I was dragged into the hut of one of my cousins—she was gone for the day. The two women didn't need to use their fingers to subject me to the fateful test, although that was the reason for their breach of protocol. My lips were open before I even had a chance to think of what I was saying. As if my only goal in life had been to reach the day when I'd be free of the yoke that kept me from being me, not a princess but a girl discovering her sexuality and offering her body, just like a Kuba artisan might offer his favorite musician the best zanza—the best thumb piano—in his collection.

I'd trampled on our most significant taboo by offering my virginity to a man other than the one my father had chosen for me five years earlier. The long-desired alliance between the Bakubas and the Balundas had come to naught. The man responsible for the debacle wasn't from any royal line with which the Nyimi might have forged a bond. The mere fact that he didn't share our habits and customs would have disqualified him out of hand, but the reality was far worse: He was paid to fight everything we represented to the occupier.

My chosen prince was a white man who served Bula Matari.

As soon as I shut my mouth, my mother clasped her belly. Her face twisted, expressing a pain as intense as a red-hot needle stabbed through a nipple. Tears rolled down her cheeks. She doubled over. Then, as the many copper bracelets she wore on her arms clattered loudly, she fainted and hit the ground hard—the blow would've been fatal to someone more fragile.

Everything happened so quickly.

Aunt Mengi was gone in the blink of an eye, quickly reappearing with a pot of a balm she rubbed on my mother's brow—she was still splayed out on the ground, her eyes glassy. Trembling like a leaf, I didn't dare touch the woman who'd said, before she fainted, "My daughter, my Princess Tshala, what crime did I commit that you punish me so violently?"

Her older sister disappeared again, for a bit longer this time. She came back brandishing a satchel with the few personal belongings I'd left behind in my room. She frantically shoved the satchel into my arms.

“Save yourself, my niece.”

“What—”

“Save yourself and don’t waste another minute!”

“Where do you want—”

“Quickly, I say! Borrow the hawk’s wings or the doe’s fleet feet, but run faster than the wind, do you hear me? I should not be the one to organize your escape from the Kuba Kingdom and shield you from the punishment the king is entitled to impose for what you have done to your people—I’m well aware of that. But this evening I decided to silence the sovereign’s servant and speak as a mother who, for nine long months, carried a daughter who looks like you.”

“I have nowhere to go, Aunt Mengi.”

“It doesn’t matter where you go, you poor fool! Did your aunt now speaking know where to hide the night she defied her clan and offered her virginity to a married man, as old as her own father, a fisherman who made her head spin night and day? Listen, when the barn is burning, there’s no time to share secrets. You must leave right away. Run straight ahead. Run until the wild parrot leads your feet somewhere you can atone for your sin without bringing down on the head of any mortal who dares take your side the fury that now threatens to topple the pillars of the palace.”

“My mother—”

“Your mother? Your mother, that incredibly kind soul, will forgive you. But your father? The king! My king! The king is not your mother, Tshala my niece. The only way to save yourself from his fury is to flee. Do you hear me?”

The dead end of exile.

Where could I have gone? Under what rock could I have hidden from my father’s eagle eye? The only shield that could protect me from the undeniably legitimate rage of your grandfather Kena Kwete III was René Comhaire, the district administrator posted in Luebo. The man who’d upended my life, to whom I’d given my heart, and who’d said he loved me “against all reason, because in truth, my beautiful, sweet Kuba princess,

whoever fails to crawl on bended knee to the tree of folly where love awaits does not deserve to live freely.”

René greeted me after the guard, a man of about fifty who’d never seen me because he worked at night, made a strange announcement: There’s a local girl, about eighteen years old, who claims she’s a royal princess, asking to see the master of the house. It was almost six in the evening; after that time the only Blacks allowed in the white town were the handful of school students lodged in two dormitories run by the Catholic missionaries and the native servants authorized to live in with their masters—usually because of their domestic duties.

My man took in the news and tried to hide his anxiety, betrayed by the nervous hand he kept running through his hair. His eyes glazed over and his trembling fingers let the lighter his employee passed him slip to the ground.

Once he managed to pull himself together, he took my hand and plastered an enigmatic smile on his face—he always smiled like that when I touched on some embarrassing topic, like how African students were taught to sing songs that proclaimed loud and clear that we were humanity’s dregs. He invariably replied: “My beautiful, sweet Kuba princess, I already have enough on my plate trying to manage the caprices of certain smooth talkers back in Brussels, who seem to believe a colonial posting is a sinecure enlivened with safaris, each more exciting than the last. I have no intention of letting politics steal the moments of happiness you offer me, far from the chains of your traditions and the old Catholic morality so dear to my parents.”

That evening the first half of our dinner, which we shared with a man who’d been René’s guest for the last three days, ticked away in a monastic silence. René said they’d been friends for more than ten years. His name was Mark. Mark De Groof. They seemed about the same age, although the visitor was stouter, by which I mean rotund, with broad shoulders, hairy arms, and an impressively thick mustache, shaped like a brushy half-moon.

Not what you'd call handsome, unless you were one of those dupes who claimed all white men looked alike. But he had an easy laugh and liked to make fun of himself, of his physique in particular—and that made him rather likable. They'd met in Brussels, in circumstances they only vaguely recalled; the details of how their friendship started had no bearing on how they faced the twists and turns of colonial life in the tropics, Monsieur De Groof explained. His guttural voice betrayed a long-term relationship with alcohol and tobacco.

Toward the end of the meal, they mentioned Mark's sister, who was going to marry "a Parisian communist with an opinion about everything, my dear René—you see what I mean, a midget who's totally convinced Congo will be the Belgian Algeria. But the Belgians say shit to you, you little knockoff Karl Marx!" René mentioned the rising tensions among the natives in Léopoldville. "It's been bad since the old soldiers returned, in particular those from the Abyssinian campaign who, let's not forget, secured the surrender of nine Italian generals. And to think they managed that with obsolete equipment. For those Africans, the myth of the all-powerful White Man is a relic of the past. And that likely signals the real turning point of the colonial adventure." Mark then spoke about their minister of public works, who'd supposedly "turned Brussels into one immense worksite, the biggest in all Europe. Let's hope he'll have something to show us soon. In any event, that's what's expected." My man replied that the minister knew full well that, with Expo 58, he'd put his career on the line. "The whole Van Acker government," he continued, "knows that while the royal palace is saying nothing about the World's Fair just three months before the official opening, it's still the focus. The task before your associate the baron seems about as thrilling as trying to form a Negro spiritual choir among our friends the Pygmies in Haut-Uélé." Then they chatted about Mark's business: "It'd be better if the baron had the slightest idea of the potential of our business model for the international market in primitive art. Happily, I have two or three trusted allies in the Belgian Congo, chief among them René Comhaire."

The two friends patted each other on the back and raised their glasses in a toast “to the model colony and to those who chose her as their mistress!”

My Belgian prince turned to me.

“To come back to politics, albeit indirectly, Princess Tshala, I think the Congolese, who are not brainless, should follow their masters’ example. Mark is Flemish. Born in Antwerp, in the north of our kingdom. Therefore, he’s from a different ethnic group than I, who was born a bit farther south, in Namur, and am Walloon. We could be at each other’s throats—see, his is longer than mine. But I know I need him, and he knows he needs me—so we choose to walk hand in hand. Our ‘evolved’ friends, who’ve formed as many political groups as there are ethnicities in this country, eighty times larger than our own, are betting on something quite different. They spend their time plotting against each other.”

“What do you want, my dear friend, they can’t help it—just like children!”

“That’s not true, Mark, and you know it full well.”

“Not true?”

“Not at all. You know we play our part in pitting them against each other, because it does more for our cause than my official duties would allow me to admit anywhere outside the walls of this house.”

“Just stop, René! I won’t let you blather on any longer. You know the Bakongo don’t really need an order from the minister of the colonies to despise the Batetela!”

“Of course not—they don’t need Auguste Buisseret to tell them to glare at each other. But just who put it into their heads—these friends of ours who went to Belgian schools—that the Bakongo were smarter than the Bangala, who are fiercer than the Balunda? Not the pope, as far as I know.”

“I can’t believe my ears! These poor devils were massacring each other with spears for centuries before our arrival, and you want me to believe the Walloons and the Flemish taught them to hate each other? You know as well as I do that the day we leave, the Good Lord himself won’t be able to protect this land from the disaster looming on the horizon. Just think of the dark night from which we rescued them.”

“Listen, Mark, you know my grandfather was here thirty-six years ago. He saw what all the people in this colony lost along with that dark night you evoke. Not one bit of what’s going on today escaped him. And do you know what? He spoke up about it.”

“Of course, he spoke up about it, our old Albert Comhaire! My friend, if the Congo Free State had taken in ten zealots like your grandfather, then despite the liquid gold—all the rubber in the Congolese forests—your country would have an economy on par with that of communist Bulgaria! And you, you’d be somewhere between Wavre and Gembloux biding your time in the shadow of a grouchy notary.”

“That’s what you’ve never understood about my grandfather’s fight, my poor Mark. He was both a scientist and a philanthropist. The total opposite of a colonialist.”

“A troublemaker standing in the way of progress—we can both agree to that, right? His ties to the Aboriginal Protection Society are too well-known. No use adding that I’ve read his writing, as well as his mentor Edmund Morel’s.”

“I’m not going to apologize for loving Congo and her people, Mark. Nor will I deny my grandfather’s free spirit, especially in the context of that time when Léopold II’s dream was praised by everyone back in the metropole.”

“Your life would be much simpler if you just focused on your love of Congo’s ivory and copper, as you used to on the women of Rwanda.”

“Without an administration that puts up barriers against despotism and barbarity, your business wouldn’t last a month, my Antwerpian capitalist.”

“The Arabs here before us didn’t think twice about administration.”

“Consequence: We defeated them before abolishing slavery.”

After they’d had a smoke on the veranda, René told me about his plan for how best to protect me from the vengeance of the Bakuba king, which was sure to fall and soon. He wasn’t worried about his own safety but didn’t want to have to use force to protect me from a poorly thought out raid by a traditional chief whose reputation as a hothead had been confirmed by multiple sources.

I wasn't about to contradict his informers. Since the dawn of time, all Bakubas have known that the marks left by a whip fade, but not those left by humiliation.

His dear friend Mark, he explained, was half trader, half art collector. For three years, he'd divided his time between Brussels and Antwerp, where he owned two art galleries, and Léopoldville, where he had his main residence. I had no idea what an art gallery might be but thought it best not to ask. I had neither the strength nor the will to mention that those bags entrusted to the daughter of our *moaridi* contained the twins' mask, one of the Bakubas' most significant totems. That would be for later, I told myself.

Mark had just agreed to my man's request: He'd take me to his home in the capital. I thought I'd misunderstood.

"To his home?"

"Yes, his home."

"Monsieur De Groof lives in the white town."

"As all whites do."

"Well?"

"René, explain to our young princess that I am offering her a job in my residence in the magnificent neighborhood of Kalina. It goes without saying that, like the other Negroes in my employ, she'll be housed in the native quarter."

"That's an excellent solution. I owe you, my dear friend."

The die was cast.

I had to choose between a jump into the unknown, under the wing of my man's friend, or the wrath of the Bakuba king, whose honor had been offended. We'd depart the next morning at dawn. We'd take the train to Port Francqui, "then board the *Ville d'Ostende* and reach Léo by boat," Monsieur De Groof explained.

René promised to come to the capital within two weeks, once he'd been able to take care of some important duties related to his position in Kasaï. When he arrived, he'd let me know what plans he'd worked out for me. It all seemed like a dream, but I couldn't afford the luxury of worrying about what consequences my departure for the capital of the Belgian Congo might

hold. I'd be going to the big city where, until recently, natives from the hinterlands were allowed only if they had a good reason and were on their best behavior.

Before drifting off to asleep, I touched the little figurine of Queen Mother Ngokady that hung from my necklace. A gift from Aunt Mengi on my thirteenth birthday, as part of the ancient ritual at the start of our initiation. A great ceremony when all of us—the thirty-five girls in my age cohort and myself—were gathered in the sacred Bena Nyimi forest. When I left Luebo, I'd be taking this sacred and highly symbolic object with me. According to our customary laws, there were few transgressions that merited a punishment as severe as the one I was about to commit.

From the court's wisest notable to the fool mocked in the most isolated hamlet, all Bakubas know that if a royal princess crosses a body of water outside of our kingdom while in possession of the figurine of Queen Mother Ngokady, the queen's spirit will be sure to express her anger. Infertility will strike any of the king's daughters who, at the moment of the misdeed, have not yet experienced the joys of motherhood. The same fate will befall the group if the offender decides to rid herself of the object, for example, if she knowingly abandons it along the way. I had at least nineteen unmarried half sisters who risked punishment. If I believed what the *moaridi* told me the day after the ritual when I received the precious figurine, this had never happened in all the long history of the Nyimi dynasty.

Exhausted, unable to think clearly about the most heart-wrenching dilemma I'd ever faced, I decided to not make any decisions. "May the wild parrot implore the most valiant of my ancestors on my behalf. May the queen mother's spirit forgive my multiple transgressions and show me the path of redemption," I murmured before seeking refuge in René's arms. Little did I know that, after that final night in Luebo, I'd never again feel the warmth of the body that had revealed to me femininity's most luminous secrets.

In Léopoldville, Mark made arrangements with his *boy*—a man named Akwesa Kolosoy, who came from the town of Mushie. I’d soon learn how truly charming this slight man of about thirty, with round cheeks, bright eyes, and a lively sense of humor, was. He believed equally in the God of the Bible and in another, made of flesh and blood, named Patrice Lumumba. Out of respect, I referred to him as Ya’ Akwesa.^[1] He agreed to take me under his roof in the native quarter of Masina, and Mark would pay him an additional stipend on top of his salary.

My sudden intrusion into his boss’s home didn’t surprise Ya’ Akwesa in the least—he knew that whites recruited household staff based on recommendations from one another, sometimes going so far as to lend each other this servant or that while they traveled back to the metropole. He was quick to tell me that it made no difference whether I was from Kasai or the region around Lake Léopold II, where he was from—he’d learned that from his mentor, whose wisdom he often cited. When he spoke, Ya’ Akwesa focused on controlling his stutter: “The thorn in the foot of the C-C-Congo, little sister Tshala, is not the power of the white man who d-d-dozes while the ground gives way beneath him, Lumumba says. It’s the Negro’s own appetite for division. The Kongos who play at being *mundele-ndombe*^[2] detest the Lubas, whom they accuse of flaunting their ethnicity like a belly button. The same Balubas want nothing to do with their brothers the Ba-Ba-Bangalas, whom they describe as shameless brutes. With sarcastic comments and barely veiled disgust, they as-as-assert that if only one could be saved, *it’d be better to finish off the Mungala and let the snake go on its*

way. May the most valiant martyrs among our ancestors protect us from ourselves!”

After his boss, who was now also mine, introduced us, Ya’ Akwesa tried to reassure me that there was nothing to fear. People say a lot of nonsense about Léopoldville, he explained, but there was no more wonderful place on earth than this thrilling city the Belgians had built on the land of Makoko, King of the Batekes. “The White Man didn’t just come here to plant flowers. But you have to admit that when the occupier wants to do something, he goes straight for it, ne-ne-never falling into the trap of futile resentment. Just look at Léo-the-capital! Eventually, he’ll have to leave this city to us. That’s really all we want. We’re patient, I’d even say very patient, because we want this to end and soon, li-li-like the prophet says. In short, tie the knot with Léo and you can tell me all about it, little sister!”

As he showed me around the property, he filled me in on our boss, and even gave me some advice on “how to keep your job with the bwana.” If his advice was mostly just a slew of clichés that any relative would’ve given to a child lucky enough to find a white employer, one detail caught my attention. Ya’ Akwesa whispered it quite softly, as if he feared his words might somehow fly right to Mark De Groof’s ears. A useless precaution, since he’d left the house a good hour before. We were alone in the expansive garden between the residence and the beautiful avenue de la Brabançonne, lined with mango trees and carefully pruned bougainvillea.

“You’re so young and so beautiful!”

“Thank you. But beauty is just a mirage. It’s what we offer our fellows that makes us fortunate, Ya’ Akwesa.”

“And you’re wise, too. I do hope you have at least a few faults?”

“I’m just repeating my mother’s words. I’m the sum of my flaws—and my parents will bear that shame until the end of their days.”

“From your mo-mo-mother’s mouth I hear the women who raised me. But let me reassure you, little sister Tshala, it’s not for the pleasure of emba-emba-embarrassing you that I mentioned your beauty.”

“I know, Ya’ Akwesa.”

“I alluded to why men’s heads spin when they look at you because that’s my duty as your big brother.”

“Please, go on.”

“It’s my duty to warn you about any danger on your pa-pa—”

“Path?”

“Yes, on the pa-pa-path I took before you.”

“I’m eternally grateful, and I’m listening.”

“Do you promise not to repeat what I have to say about bwana Mark?”

“Absolutely! I swear on the head of—”

“No need. Your word su-su-su—”

“My word suffices?”

“Yes! But don’t feel you have to complete my sentences, little sister, you’ll get ti-ti-tired. I’ve been struggling with this stutter for thirty-two years, but we’ve worked it out and live in peace. I just ask that you be pa-pa-patient with me, that’s all. Each time a woman tries to rescue me when I’m stuttering, it brings back memories of things I’d prefer to let lie, do you understand?”

“What sort of memories?”

“Those that are always better kept to yourself, little sister.”

He oozed cheerfulness. There was no need to beg for my patience.

He warned me in no uncertain terms not to spend the night at our boss’s home, not for any reason. I pretended to wonder why. I asked him why he thought Mark De Groof might try to keep me there after my work was done, since all servants had to be back in the native quarter before curfew. He didn’t want to elaborate. Yet I understood from his smile, more eloquent than any long speech, that the man was discretion personified. He’d chosen to bury skeletons that he’d never dig up in front of a stranger. In four years of loyal service in the lovely brick house his master had baptized Résidence Silvius Brabo, Ya’ Akwesa, the kindly stutterer, had seen it all. Rather than reproaching him for being faithful to his master, the wise choice was to follow in his footsteps.

I was worried about protecting my anonymity and so decided not to reveal anything about my rank or the reasons why I’d left Mushenge. I was

even more determined not to mention the true nature of my relationship with the head of Établissements M. De Groof & G. M. De Neuberg, an internationally known art dealer, as I later learned.

Before we each got busy with our work, there was one thing I was curious about, so I asked Ya' Akwesa.

“Your name—”

“Akwesa Kolosoy. Yes, um, Fé-Fé-Félix, since my Catholic baptism.”

“Yes, yes. But, Kolosoy?”

“I'm his older brother.”

“Tell me you're joking! Are you?”

“No joke, little sister Tshala. You're standing in front of the older brother of Antoine Wendo Kolosoy, the great rumba singer who has all Léopoldville eating from the palm of his hand. The very same who gives hives to the Catholic missionaries.”

“Where I'm from, all the Blacks listen to Wendo Kolosoy's songs from morning to night—starting with my father.”

“There's nowhere in all of Belgian Congo where the Blacks do anything different.”

“I must be dreaming!”

“Even better: My mother's son lives with me in Ma-Ma-Masina. This very evening, when we get to the house, you'll be able to shake his hand and tell him how much you love his music. He'll be very flattered. He likes to hear he's a prodigy.”

“I must be dreaming. Tell me I'm dreaming.”

He chuckled.

He was amused by the look on my face when I learned my new colleague was the brother of the most beloved singer in the whole country. We were actually talking about Wendo Kolosoy, the man with a voice like no other, the unrivaled songwriter whose name had spread across the Belgian Congo as fast as the natives' favorite brand of beer. The man who'd given us—under the influence of some brew—the song “Marie-Louise.” There was a rumor about that number-one hit, a tune still just as hot today as it was then. A rumor that was maybe not just a rumor. Whether urban

legend or Black Gospel, it was a bad sign for the singer, who'd been elevated, despite himself, to the rank of great tempter in the eyes of Yahweh.

“Marie-Louise.”

It was said that if the melody was performed under the glow of the night star, the land around the singer would split open, revealing a horrific wound filled with the darkest debauchery. Jealous of rumba's Black stars, the night sky itself would come down from its majestic alcove and embrace the impiety championed by the most carefree mortals.

Marie-Louise

Solo e e eh

Ngai na yo.

Congo had been converted to Christianity by the will of Léopold II, but Wendo Kolosoy challenged Jesus of Nazareth's monopoly on holy miracles. Here in the tropics, he was the one who freed paralytics from their crutches on the Sabbath so they could take over the dance floor and say screw you to a land that had condemned them to numbing paralysis. An ode to the unattainable woman who'd planted a beating heart in the singer's head, where his brain should've been, “Marie-Louise” made it worthwhile to break the curfew set by Governor-General Léo Pétillon.

Wapi Marie-Louise?

Bowane beta lindanda

Lobela ngai wapi tina Louise.

Wendo Kolosoy was the king of the night. He'd turned the shores of the Congo River into the Zion of those who'd escaped the chicotte—that fearsome whip made of strips of hippopotamus hide that the colonizers and their Negro lackeys used on the backs of those who would not submit. On the day when Belgium triumphantly honored those who'd died for the fatherland, Wendo Kolosoy sang “Marie-Louise” and those who'd died for the birth of a new Congo exulted. The dead of this world were transformed

from dust into flesh, from shadow into incandescent light. Wendo Kolosoy gave Lazarus, buried under the master's humiliation, the breath of life needed to rekindle his desire to brave the most infamous of taboos: the right to get down and dirty with the rumba until he fell into a trance. Hearing Wendo Kolosoy's voice, anyone who had a bone to pick with those who'd outlawed happiness would join the other revelers in Léo-the-capital to celebrate life and all those vices that made it worth living.

Unbelievable, but according to the man who introduced himself as his brother, the mythical author of "Marie-Louise" lived under the very roof I would soon share.

"Isn't he supposed to be in hiding in Mushie?"

"Officially he's hunkered down in Stanleyville, near the headwaters of the river. That's where the former governor Eugène Jungers exiled him a few years ago, when 'Marie-Louise' managed to turn Léo upside down. You must've heard that the Church decreed the song sa-sa-sa-tanic."

"What do you mean, satanic?"

He burst out laughing. A strident laugh that ended as a cough. He excused himself before answering.

"What do I know, huh? That was the reason given to justify the ban. The cassock-wearers apparently went to the apostolic vicariate and wailed. 'That song was inspired by Be-Be-Beelzebub in person. Look at all those Negroes, you'd think they were possessed—they barely work, they have no shame. That Wendo Kolosoy is an avowed enemy of the Ho-Ho-Holy Trinity. He wants to build Sodom and Go-Go-Gomorra right here on both shores of Stanley Pool. It's the administration's responsibility to put a stop to this descent into hell.'"

"And Bula Matari went along with the ban?"

"Little sister Tshala, the real government in the Belgian Co-Co-Congo is the Catholic Church—minus the cross."

"You sound just like my father. What does that—"

“Listen, you’re too young to recognize right away the God of the Holy Trinity who walks naked among us. Remind me to have you read Patrice Lumumba’s speeches. It’s all there.”

“Okay. But what you just told me is that, officially, Wendo Kolosoy is in hiding in Stanleyville.”

“Stanleyville? They really didn’t know my brother. It doesn’t matter if his fame has spread up and down both sides of the river, it’s here in Léo that he finds his inspiration, his muses.”

“So...”

He smiled and rubbed his hands together—clearly, he was quite proud of what he was about to share.

“So he came back. No one was the wiser—he stowed away in a bo-bo-boat. Some brother sailors helped us. I say brothers, but to be honest, they couldn’t have do-do-done it without the help of two or three whites who were willing to clo-clo-close their eyes. They’re fans of his music, too. One supposedly even said, ‘Wendo, if I get you out of this, I owe you one. Each time I hear that damned voice of yours on vinyl, I get an erection. All Léo says you’re a sorcerer and that’s gotta be true—but you’re the only useful sorcerer I know.’ That’s how he made it back.”

“How audacious!”

“He hid at first, then he got back to his usual routine with his friend Bowane and the rest of the band. They’re the enfants terribles of Léo’s nights. You’ve got to see them on a sta-sta-stage, little sister Tshala! The devil himself would be jealous.”

I asked if the Marie-Louise of the song was an actual person—a woman in flesh and blood that his brother had loved and who’d broken his heart before disappearing, melding back into nature. He answered that like other singers, his brother certainly drew inspiration from real life, but truth was both flat and clichéd. He usually concocted a mix of illusions, dreams, and fantasies in hopes of sparking a bit of madness, a bit of that intoxication craved by musical fanatics, him and me included.

“I see, Ya’ Akwesa. But you still didn’t tell me if that woman really exists. I mean...Could you run into her somewhere on the street in Léo, or

maybe in Brazza?”

“What difference would it make if she were just the sum of all the sleepless nights my brother spent in the bare little room my wife and I loaned him in Ma-Ma-Masina? Would his admirers go any less wild? Would that reassure the church? You know, in another life, I once met a woman, right in this very house where I earn my living, who could’ve walked straight out of a dream. But that’s another story, one of those that it’s al-al-always better to keep to yourself.”

“How secretive you are! You know, I’d really love to hear him sing ‘Marie-Louise’ one day.”

“I know it bothers him to have his repertory reduced to just that one hit. But don’t hesitate to as-as-ask him for a private performance. He calls them his a cappellas. Don’t ask me where he got that term. Just ask him some evening, after he’s had his fill of *foufou* and two bottles of Polar. If Wendo Kolosoy could refuse a request from this girl right here, then I still don’t know anything about women and their power.”

We chuckled over that.

He had straight white teeth—very white—and was wearing a tightly fitting red-and-white jersey adorned with the emblem of the Royal Antwerp Football Club. With each laugh, you could see his muscles ripple. He told me that his brother and his friends had been approached by a popular Congolese journalist who wrote for *L’Avenir*, Joseph-Désiré Mobutu, about playing the rumba at a party for his wedding anniversary. If I wanted to hear the artist play his best numbers and shake the hand of the man he called “the future president of a free and independent Congo, Pa-Pa-Patrice Lumumba,” then I just had to put on my prettiest dress and get ready. The party would take place in a couple of weeks, he wasn’t sure where. But with his brother’s help, De Groof’s *boy* and I could be passed off as members of the orchestra and get close to Lumumba. “After that, little sister Tshala,” he whispered with a wink, “I’ll have no-no-nothing else to ask from God but a little bit of land where to bleach my bones.”

You’d have thought he was a kid.

Right after that party, Mobutu—along with Lumumba and other “evolved” citizens who dreamed of a Congo where no native would have think twice before celebrating love—would fly off to Belgium. “All those fancy people are expected at the World’s Fair in Brussels, a planetary event you only s-s-see once or twice in a century,” Ya’ Akwesa explained.

That was the second time I’d heard about that global celebration—lots of people were talking about it in the Belgian Congo, just like here in the colonial power. You know, my niece, my Ndoyi, sometimes life sends us seemingly indecipherable messages that our minds just can’t grasp. Then, all of a sudden, there’s a flash of light that leaves us blind.

—

How could I have imagined, there under the skies of Léo, that with me gone, my father’s anger had become a devastating fire rushing across the savanna? Should I have expected as much, since Kena Kwete III had always been quick to anger and ready to defend his honor? Should I have remembered that a descendant of Woto would have to respond to an affront like the one dealt by the man guilty of inhabiting my thoughts night and day?

The Bakuba king had never hidden his disdain for those among his ancestors who’d swallowed their humiliation instead of answering with all means at their disposal.

Forgiveness?

Forgiveness was, to his mind, a double-edged sword; any chief worthy of his rank should be wary of it. Patience, the stone on which each day the worthy patriarch sharpened the spear he’d use to harpoon whomsoever dared defy him before his subjects.

More concretely, I knew Kena Kwete III had nothing but disdain for his ancestor Bolongongo I, who reigned sometime after the bloody conflict with Nsapu Nsapu, the mercenary who could have learned much about decency from a dog. A king who, unlike our Valiant Sovereign Woto, came to a bitter end. More than once I’d heard my father assert that “cowardice

searched long and hard for a face, until the day my ancestor Bolongongo lent him his own.” He recalled that, under the sixtieth dynasty, his ancestor Bolongongo I issued a decree that made all men in his kingdom tremble, and then carried him off like a dead leaf, blown away by the wind.

An ill wind.

Having reached the end of his adolescence, and with the blessing of the queen mother, who’d been serving as regent, the young man set off along trails, rivers, and hills hitherto unknown to his people. Accompanied by three slaves who’d been freed when they came of age, he wanted to explore the country. His wanted to learn from the good manners of other peoples. And also to see firsthand what vices he’d need to protect the Bakubas from once he became their king: “I’m barely seventeen years old and all I know of life came to me here in Kuba land. And yet, by Bumba Chembe, the Creator, the earth includes kingdoms led by rulers wiser than our most inspired kings, and many others sinking ever further into their own ineluctable decrepitude. The dauphin’s duty, if there is one, is to drink deeply at the sources of one and the other.”

Once he’d returned to the capital, and as soon as the celebration of his ascension to the throne was complete, the young Bolongongo took an unprecedented action. Surrounded by peoples jealous of the Bakubas’ prosperity and who’d waged war against them time and time again, he immediately banned the use of lethal weapons by the regiments he’d inherited from his predecessor. He became the head of an army that was no longer an offensive army, but one intended for defense alone. An army without even one throwing knife that would face the kingdom’s enemies only in duels of hand-to-hand combat.

This audacious decision intrigued the few Europeans who visited the kingdom in the early days of his reign, who’d ventured into those remote, dangerous lands where the least misunderstanding between an explorer and a tribal chief could end in a bloodbath. The idea of a defensive army waiting empty-handed to face the enemy unsettled the neighboring monarchs, who surmised that the Kuba king had a more sinister plot in mind. But time soon revealed that the young man had returned from his

long journey with a deeply held aversion for the blood of his fellow man; he saw war as the most tangible expression of human barbarity.

The *moaridi* say the monarch truly believed that he who sought peace should be the last to show his neighbors any signs of preparing for war. In those days, when a Kuba arrived in a foreign land and was caught in an ambush, he just needed to cry out, “I am a subject of Bolongongo, my only weapons are the words that come out of my mouth!” and his life would be saved. The enemy would remember that our king had bet on the possibility of a permanent peace. That he had tacitly imposed upon his rivals both a pact of nonaggression and an agreement to protect each other’s subjects, without exception.

But whatever the *moaridi* might say, whatever our commemorative ballets proclaim, my father mostly remembered that his ancestor’s reign lasted only as long as the echo after a blast of artillery fire. Betting on the good faith of his rivals was, alas, hardly a solution. One day, a Belgian, a representative of the state magistrate in Luluabourg, arrived and requisitioned porters to carry his cargo of ivory to a new trading post situated about a fifteen-day march from Mushenge. Seeing the state of the poor fellows who’d already made the first half of the journey—tattered remains of men, with deadened eyes and wobbling legs, bound together in a line by chains around their necks, carrying their burdens on their heads, their faces covered with flies and ribs poking out for lack of sufficient food—Bolongongo refused to breathe new life into this caravan of death.

The king remembered that two months earlier the same stranger, accompanied by the head of the all-powerful Compagnie du Kasai, to which King Léopold I had given a monopoly over the exploitation of rubber in the Kasai basin, had come to collect this accursed product. A real scoundrel, he was. First, he’d had twenty-five lashes administered to each of the thirty-seven poor souls who hadn’t reached their quotas. Then he’d taken the wives of those men hostage, holding them until the men brought back from

the forest enough rubber to meet the company's demands. When they returned to the hamlet bearing the fruits of their hard labor, the Belgian then demanded three goats from each of them before he'd free their wives. The king had been unable to stop that inexcusable abuse of power.

And now the same man was back in Mushenge looking for porters among the healthy men he'd had rounded up in the village. This time Bolongongo categorically refused. So the Black soldier leading the convoy ordered the twenty guards escorting him and his chief to execute anyone who refused to join the caravan and replace the exhausted porters. But the guards were from neighboring peoples that had accepted Bolongongo's pact of nonaggression. Five of them opted to disobey—they turned in their rifles and went to stand alongside the Bakubas. The others used their rifles to massacre an enemy that had not even one poisoned arrow with which to answer their enemy's fire.

That was the end of a dream the Nyimi had bemoaned ever since.

Once glorified for having made the spear obsolete and for making wisdom and craftsmanship the hallmark of his throne, Bongolongo I lost face that day. So he did the only thing a crushed monarch can do: He abdicated. Then he went alone, dressed in his simplest garb, into the heart of the sacred Bena Nyimi forest, where he sat beneath the tallest tree in the kingdom, waiting under its canopy for seven days and seven nights for a starving wild beast to reclaim his soul or for the leaden sky to send down lightning to smite him. Since nothing like that happened, he retraced his path and lived in reclusion in his palace, without eating or drinking, until he starved, in the twenty-fifth dry season of his short life. The Kuba kings have known other, more glorious epilogues.

A world was dying. And in blood and terror, another emerged.

When his eldest son succeeded him and chose the dynastic name Mikope Woto II, he rebuilt the army. He called on blacksmiths to equip elite units with the most fearsome artillery produced on the right bank of the Kasai. Three seasons later, when a messenger arrived at his court with news that a Tchokwe chief was preparing to attack a trading post on the lower reaches of the Kwenge River, Mikope Woto II knew his time had come. He

ordered his second-in-command and a hundred and five of his best warriors to cross savannas and forests and reinforce the ranks of the insurgents. Some thirty slaves accompanied them, carrying arms and food.

Overtrained and heavily armed, his men led the offensive against the Public Force, the occupier's military arm. They waged an epic battle and freed the hostages held there. They captured the chief of the outpost, made him parade naked before the very subjects he'd long terrorized, then had him lie on the ground, and, after binding him solidly, administered almost a hundred lashes, just as some among them had received on his orders. Then, as he begged for clemency with his last breath, they tore off his ears. They returned to Mushenge with his white helmet, the symbol of the occupier's intractable power. The king made that prestigious trophy his chamber pot. Depositing his excrement in it gave the sovereign his greatest pleasure, as he loved to tell his notables when alcohol loosened his tongue. An ecstasy inversely proportional to the pain he'd once felt at seeing his now deceased father humiliated.

Since that time, each meeting of the royal council begins with a song whose final verses proclaim that whoever spits on the throne of the Nyimi will find no salvation, not under a rock nor in the glare of the sun. Rarely did I see my father's eyes glow with greater pride than when he leaped out of his throne wearing the royal mask, with a flyswatter in one hand and a javelin in the other, sketched a few dance steps, and hummed the refrain attributed to Mikope Woto II: *Honor is washed clean by blood alone. What kind of screwup are you that you think puffing out your gut, after you've been whipped on the back, will earn your self-respect?*

And he danced.

He danced with his eyes half closed, his back straight and tall.

He danced as if this antiphon of a foregone era had transformed him, lifted him above certain defeat, catapulted him far beyond the reach of that unavoidable failure foretold by his brother Prince Osako, the absent one everyone knew as the Unbowed Rebel.

- [1.](#) Ya‘ is a diminutive of yaya, meaning “big brother” or “big sister.”
- [2.](#) A Kikongo expression for a Black man who tries to imitate whites. The term *mundele* (plural, *mindele*) is also used in Lingala.

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Since the district administrator had spit on the throne of the Nyimi, the king had one and only one obsession: Making him pay. Even if he lost his own skin in the process.

After I'd been in Léopoldville for a while, Mark told me how my father tried to make René Comhaire understand that the laws of the Belgian Congo were neither the rock nor the armor capable of dissuading a worthy descendant of Woto or Mikope Woto II from exacting revenge. My boss told me what had happened in Kasai after my hurried departure. Events that explained why René hadn't kept his word and come to the capital as he'd promised when we'd said goodbye.

I'd placed all my trust in René.

The day after my flight, my father sent his men to the residence of the young official with the creamy white helmet. Their mission was simple: Make him pay and bring back the princess. The fifty archers were met by units of the Public Force that my man had placed on high alert. The two camps faced off in front of the administrative offices: It was a real bloodbath. The official tally was seven dead and two seriously injured among the Kuba royal guard; two dead and one slightly wounded among Bula Matari's henchmen.

To calm tempers and ensure René's safety, the central authorities immediately transferred their protégé. René Comhaire had been sent far away from the site of the skirmish, farther west, to Banningville, near Ya' Akwesa's hometown. Mark De Groof told me he'd been evacuated one night under armed guard, something rarely seen in the colony. As for my

father, he was held briefly until Protestant missionaries secured his release after a hefty bond had been paid.

In a foul mood, Mark added that the “troublemaker’s” exile had only complicated things for him and his Belgian business partner, a man he referred to as “the baron.” He didn’t give me any more details, but really, he didn’t have to. The look on his face that evening told me all I needed to know about the resentment he struggled to conceal.

A new page.

After that exchange, I noticed a gradual shift in Mark De Groof’s attitude toward me. First, at five o’clock one evening, as Ya’ Akwesa and I were leaving the Résidence Silvius Brabo, he asked his *boy* to leave us alone, there was something urgent he needed me to do. Suspicious, Ya’ Akwesa dared ask if that wouldn’t put me at risk of being stopped by the police for breaking the curfew. It soon became clear that his reason for making me risk missing the bus was highly unusual. Monsieur had just started his shower when he called for me to join him in the next room. I obeyed, but not without apprehension.

I pushed open the sliding door that separated his bedroom from the bath. Suddenly there was Mark De Groof, as naked as the Holy Trinity his *boy* said he’d found and worshipped in towns and villages across the Belgian Congo. Except this time, it wasn’t just an image concocted by the imagination of that tried-and-true Lumumbist. Right there before my eyes was a penis, dangling beneath a belly that would have benefited from less beer and potatoes.

Turmoil.

My boss held out a bar of soap and a washcloth and asked me to scrub his back. He suggested I undress, to “protect your pretty dress from getting wet.” I made a superhuman effort to remain calm and not let the disgust and rage rising within me show. I replied that, out of respect for his friend, I had no choice but to refuse. His nudity left me no choice, I said, locking eyes with him. One of us needed to retreat—clearly it would be me. Mark De Groof chuckled, fingered his flaccid sex with his right hand, and then

shouted, “What a stupid Bamboula princess! This is a penis, good god! No smaller or uglier than Monsieur Comhaire’s, am I right?”

Rage.

I can’t tell you where I found the courage I revealed that night. The fact is, I turned on my heels and slammed the door behind me. I walked to the bus stop where Ya’ Akwesa was waiting. My big brother lowered his eyes when he saw me coming and, during the long hour of our trip, he asked no questions. He kept his eyes glued on a pamphlet he always had with him: *Our Future: The Unbearable Scent of the Father*.

For the next week, any word he tried to use to start a conversation got stuck in his throat. Unbearably banal phrases punctuated our work and the meals we shared in Masina. We were crossing a verbal desert that suited each of us, forestalling any misunderstanding that might have cast doubt on our separate interpretations of what had changed in Kalina. Our master had decided to test the unequal relationship that, by some twist of fate and the laws of the Belgian Congo, brought three individuals together under one roof. Ya’ Akwesa was walking on a tightrope. Trying to balance his loyalty to the bwana who ensured his livelihood and his duty to protect me, his little sister. As for Mark—the master of the game, loyal only to his own penis—he did his best to appear calm and collected. I almost started to question my own mental health: Had I dreamed it all?

Avoidance.

As if I hadn’t been through enough, now Wendo Kolosoy, who’d greeted me warmly when I arrived at his brother’s home, decided he had his own role to play. Or rather, the second act of a script begun a few days earlier. You see, he was juggling several more or less subtle plots in hopes of drawing me into his bed.

First, he started joining me in the quiet corner where I usually sat in the evening, fretting about a thousand things—from my man, who’d sent no news, to what would happen to me in Léopoldville if Mark tossed me out on the street. He sang “Marie-Louise” to me at least every other day. Then one day when I’d begged off work because I was having awful menstrual cramps, the singer offered to take me to the neighborhood market. As we

walked, kids and even some adults followed along, calling out “Wendo, screw the Cathos, stir us up one of those rumbas we adore!” That’s when Léo’s local hero—my would-be seducer—did something that really surprised me: He started to tell me a fable. A little bawdy, a little poetic, the fable really had two morals: first, to convince me that the prince of my nights in the capital was not some local who’d sacrifice ancestral wisdom on the altar of the rumba; and second, to give me the key to the magical spell he’d cast over an adoring crowd in just a few days. Because whatever you might think, Antoine Wendo Kolosoy was not someone who did things halfway—not in the slightest!

The following Saturday was the third wedding anniversary of Joseph-Désiré Mobutu, a journalist at *L’Avenir*, and his young and very beautiful wife, Marie-Antoinette Gbiatibwa. Word had it that there was eleven years between the two. They’d rented the Léo-Bisengo for the party, a very popular bar in the native town. Right in the heart of Bandalungwa, one of the quarters reserved for “evolved” citizens that had been built around the edge of the white town.

Ya’ Akwesa and I had no trouble slipping into the bar behind Wendo Kolosoy and his band. The happy couple had spent their last dime—unless they’d gotten outrageous sums from friends and family. All sorts of delicacies were laid out with care on four tables covered with immaculate white tablecloths. Different types of beer, local brands like Polar and Belgian beers like Leffe and Duvel, were being poured at a dizzying rate, much to the joy of the guests.

Léo-the-festive, Léo-Bisengo: The bar had earned its name.

This was the first time I’d seen so many “evolved” citizens gathered in one place. Men and women alike, all dressed to the nines—it was enough to give you a complex if you hadn’t been forewarned. Yet I quickly noticed what was off, what irritated me as I looked around the room. They were all Black, but not one of the guests seemed aware of that. After getting dressed

in our master's clothes, they were talking like *mindele*, prancing about, gesturing and waving their cigarettes or pipes, just like them. I'd never seen anything like it, not in Mushenge, not in Luebo. If someone was looking for proof that Léopoldville was a fascinating town, all they had to do was drop by the Léo-Bisengo on the night of the journalist Joseph-Désiré Mobutu's wedding anniversary.

My eyes were riveted on Ya' Akwesa. Mark's boy was waiting for Patrice Lumumba to step away from his friends and head out back for a smoke. That'd be his chance to talk to him—a moment he'd been dreaming about nonstop. A native of Kasai, where the Nyimi dynasty did its best each year to shore up the scraps of power left it by Bula Matari, Patrice Lumumba was truly adored in Léo. People talked about him in the same way that the Church described Moses, the Prophet of Israel. For his partisans, the Belgian Congo was Egypt, King Baudouin the Pharaoh, we were Nzambi Mpungu's chosen people, and Patrice Lumumba the Moses who'd lead us across the Red Sea.

I remembered the day Ya' Akwesa showed me Lumumba's photo, which he'd tucked inside the pamphlet *Our Future*, and said, "D-d-do ya' hear me, little sister? After suffering under Léopold II, the Belgian Congo's time has come. The day Patrice Lumumba lifts his little finger, this country will give birth without even fe-fe-feeling the first contractions. Lu-Lu-Lumumba says 'Fire!' and that's *dipanda*. Do the Belgians know that? Of course, they do!"

What he never knew is that even my father, there on his throne in the Kuba Kingdom, was a fervent supporter of the prophet of *dipanda*. My father even claimed, taking his friend the *moaridi* as his witness, that Lumumba was the reincarnation of a Tetela chief. Because he'd taken up arms when the colonizers first arrived in his territory, the conquerors decapitated the chief in the middle of the night and then hid his head. That was under the eightieth Kuba king, my father always noted, and my friend Kisita's father would agree, without offering any further explanation. It's true, the *moaridi* was evasive when asked what he really thought about Lumumba. And even more so when the question of his messianic dreams

was raised: Who could guarantee, the wise man with the tall, slender silhouette insinuated, that once seated in the governor-general's chair, the Tetela Moses wouldn't express a similarly biting disdain for traditional powers?

Standing at the back of the bar with his arms crossed, Ya' Akwesa drank in each word that fell from the lips of the long-awaited liberator. Because I'd lived with him day in and day out, I knew how thirsty he was. His dreams of freedom and dignity stretched out to the horizon.

With his glasses and a neat part dividing his hair, Patrice Lumumba could have been René Comhaire's twin brother—that is if his skin weren't as dark as Mark's servant's. Even if the oracle pronounced by the *moaridi* and his monarch were true, what could a master fear from a Black man who'd adopted not only his glasses and his reserved smile but also his more subtle coquetry? Was there another Lumumba hiding behind that watchful, slightly hunched silhouette? Was he both the inoffensive scabbard and the sharpened blade ready to sever the bonds that kept Congo from running after a past that the “evolved” promised to bring back to life?

Was Patrice Lumumba a mole trying to discover the chink in his enemy's armor before pouncing on him like a starving hyena?

Those were the thoughts trotting about in my head when I saw our host heading toward his two guests.

Ya' Akwesa was about to retreat so the two “evolved” men, the journalist and the politician, could chat, when the saxophone let loose with a high, plaintive note, tearing the night's cottony veil. As the drowsy crowd roared back to life, the woodwind gave way to the guitar, which let loose with a series of blasts, each more deafening than the last. Those high-flying notes went straight to our hearts. A dance step rippled through the crowd, smoothing out the pagnes, straightening the creases of the bell-bottomed tergal trousers, and setting the soles of those gentlemen's shoes tapping. Vibrant and breathy, the music didn't just come from the stage; it rose up from the ground, from the shoes of the men and women who reached out and pulled each other close, just barely avoiding collisions as they synchronized their graciously rhythmmed steps.

For the first time that evening, something jumped deep inside me, unsettling my nonchalance for good.

As the guitar faded away, its riff blended with the gentle, calming sound of the *lokolé*,^[1] played with impressive dexterity by a youth with feminine features who'd greeted me with a shy smile—"Bonsouah moazelle"—as I'd come into the bar. I watched the band's star, Antoine Wendo Kolosoy, go over to the youngest of his musicians, who was also the least slender of the three sax players. In a tender gesture that recognized his protégés talent, the singer ran his fingers over the boy's bushy hair, then took two steps forward and grabbed the microphone.

—

I thought my heart was going to explode. I heard him retell, ever so melodically, that fable he'd told me four days before on the way from Masina to the Kotaniongo market.

I had goose bumps as I drank down each note, each word, each silence of that song, which told of a penniless young man who one day gathered his belongings in a sack, along with his courage, and set out to walk night and day until his feet reached the horizon. He was searching for the love of a life he'd forgotten to live, so busy he'd been wondering if living just meant dying each day with happiness always out of reach, or if happiness only existed if you thought its pursuit was the meaning of life. He reached the edge of the Bateke Kingdom, where the evening clouds slaked their thirst over a river as indolent as those who live along its shores and pour their lost illusions into it along with the town's waste. Where those who cannot buy love with cursed, shiny, disgusting currency, pay usurer's rates for it to the rising sun. Yes, the sun is a creditor who gives the most despicable bwana, ready to betray his oldest friend, the same shitty treatment he reserves for the weakest of natives, who can't push back against the absurd by giving a wooden nickel back to the cheat in change for his accursed coin. Where the woman who questions a man, whose eyes are dripping red with desire, doesn't run away shouting, "Holy Mary, Mother of God!" Where love

means opening the doors of hell to embrace with a smile the flames reserved for those who willingly trade their senses for a deafened heart.

The travels of the young, penniless man led him to the gates of a kingdom whose most beautiful daughter, a royal princess, was promised to the stranger who would take up the challenge dreamed up by His Majesty.

The princess—unconquered by Livingstone, the explorer; by Tippu Tip, the slave trader; or by Léopold II, the swallower of Negro dynasties—had a name more beautiful than even Wendo Kolosoy's music. Sweeter than the Eucharist wine so dear to Reverend Father Léon Cuppens, who forgets all his Latin when Wendo the unbowed Negro sings of his love for Marie-Louise. The princess was named Tshala Nyota. The king offered our traveler with the ardent heart a woven basket, then pointed to a path behind his palace. If he wanted the hand of the beautiful Tshala, the king asked him to bring back in the very same basket the river that flowed at the bottom of the valley.

Woven basket in hand and hair blowing in the breeze, our seeker of love took the path to the river as the courtiers and subjects of the king murmured. One hour later the crowd saw the suitor return empty-handed but with a smile on his lips. He approached the monarch, who was holding the hand of the princess who was for all the men in the land what freedom had become for the people of the river: a fleeting shadow. The traveler pulled from the pocket of his flowing adventurer's coat a long cigar. He lit it. He patiently drew in the smoke, then sent a puff toward the king before saying these words:

*O great wise king
grasp hold of the smoke before you
pull a strand from it
like those woven by the men of your land
a cord you will give me
once you judge it strong (strong)
so I can tie to it the basket full of water
that I left back behind me (there behind me)*

*the basket I will haul to your feet
o great wise king
for did I not promise you before witnesses (before witnesses)
that for the eyes of that girl
that eclipse Mother Moon herself at nightfall
I would go to the feet of the cross (to the feet of the cross)
for on the cross named Tshala
Wendo Kolosoy would happily spend his days
happy to abandon his only worldly good
his voice bewitched by the rumba (bewitched by the rumba).*

Apotheosis.

Conquered and subjugated, the guests lent their vocal chords to the dazzling orchestra. Rocking together, side to side, the Mobutus made their way back onto the dance floor. “*On the cross named Tshala, Wendo Kolosoy would happily spend his days*” insisted the refrain. Three steps to the right. Two to the left. Joseph-Désiré pulled close a Marie-Antoinette as light as a toucan’s feather. On their right, a woman let loose a long, strident cry. I thought of the matrons who announce the consummation of Kuba weddings with the same deafening roar: “Yéleleleleléeeeh!”

I focused on her.

Breathtakingly beautiful, enough to make you die of jealousy: tall, slender, her skin shining black, legs that just wouldn’t stop, a chest only slightly more impressive than my own. She pulled a pagne from her purse and wrapped it around Madame Mobutu, accentuating the curvaceous hips of the journalist’s wife. Her duty done, she was swept off by a slender man in a dazzling display of footwork—clearly the work of a rumba sorcerer. You had to see it! How those two upstaged everyone else’s moves there in the Léo-Bisengo.

Banknotes flew. Scarves and handkerchiefs, too.

I felt someone behind me. Turning, I was stunned to find myself nose to nose with a smiling Patrice Lumumba! The prophet held out his hand and

slowly backed away, dancing. After a hesitating for just a moment, I grabbed the hand.

Try as I might to bring back those memories, I can't tell you exactly what happened in the minutes after that initial touch. I must have been in a trance when I abandoned myself in his arms, certainly overwhelmed that the man so adored by everyone in Léo had offered me a dance—and, what's more, in a place where each woman was more beautiful, more sensual than the next. A trance that, despite the music pounding on our eardrums, didn't keep me from hearing him whisper in my ear, "I've written the address of the main office of Bracongo on the slip of paper I'm passing you right now. Come see me one of these days, we'll be able chat comfortably there. If you're not interested in the pitiful dance partner now courting ridicule with all these impressive dancers circling around us, then please, come for the man who dreams of hearing his people intone the hymn of African renaissance. *Sala ngai plaisir, moseka, oko regretter ata moke te!*"^[2]

I let myself be carried toward the middle of the floor where Joseph-Désiré Mobutu was now dancing with my partner's wife, Pauline Opango—a woman who, according to Ya' Akwesa, did not stop glaring at me for the rest of the evening.

Once the dancing started, it was an entirely different party.

The "evolved" were less stuffy, laughing like Negroes again—they were relaxed, free. "On the Cross Named Tshala" succeeded in blowing away all the pretentiousness of the journalist's friends, and he was beaming with joy. Really, I should say it was Wendo Kolosoy's talent that made it a real native party and not just an uptight parody.

Reworking a fable Aunt Mengi had told me when I was just a child, Wendo Kolosoy immortalized me as a princess from the shores of the Congo River. But he had no idea I really was the daughter of Nyimi. He had no idea that, if by some miracle he arrived in Mushenge and asked for my hand, it would take more than a bit of wit to confound Kena Kwete III. My father wouldn't have asked him to bring back the river in a basket full of holes, he would've just advised him to be grateful to Bula Matari for the rest of his days in this world. And for good reason: The government of the

Belgian Congo hadn't just abolished slavery, it had made it a crime for a Nyimi to castrate the fleabag who dared—despite all laws of genealogy—to announce his desire to marry one of his daughters. Bula Matari's laws would soon be forgotten, but to suggest that we'd waited for the White Man's arrival to invent villainy amounted to pissing on a hundred and twenty generations of memory keepers.

Looking to my right, I saw Ya' Akwesa grinning from ear to ear, unable to hide how happy he was to have been in on the secret. I wasn't happy he'd let his brother know about our boss's bad behavior. That was the only explanation I could see for why the singer-suitor lamented in his melodious fable that he could do nothing to punish René's friend's betrayal. Ya' Akwesa almost admitted telling him, but then warned me to “watch out for Madame Lumumba,” who was not the type of woman to let things go. I shrugged and replied that Pauline Opango had no need to worry about me.

What he confided next really opened my eyes—and gave me some hint of the event that was about to upend my life for good.

He'd overheard a conversation between Mark and a visitor that had gotten him thinking. He'd heard monsieur confess that he'd hired me to help out an old friend, René Comhaire. Then he added that he was feeling betrayed, because his friend—a typical Walloon—had behaved like a rascal. The knife in his back, he said, freed him from any further obligation.

“Did he say anything specific?”

“The Comhaire, he said, were a family of traitors, like father like son.”

“That's not what I heard him say the night René Comhaire introduced us.”

“According to him, this Monsieur Co-Co-Comhaire owed him and his business partner Guido something-or-other, some ju-ju-junk worth more than eight thousand francs!”

“That's a fortune, eight thousand francs! Mark De Groof is out of his mind!”

“Since his transfer to Banningville, his friend was reneging on the terms of their agreement. He’d sent him things that were wo-wo-worthless. Bwana said something about ‘crap no idiot would want to see in Brussels, Paris, or London.’ ”

“He must mean those statues he’s obsessed with.”

“Between you and me, that man would trade his mother and father for a piece of wood. You probably don’t know this, but all the whites in town call him ‘the king of masks,’ which tells me that sooner or later, his business is going to bring him bad luck, something he’ll never ge-ge-get over as long as he lives, but that’s another story. What really upset me, little sister, is that he told his visitor that if things keep going like that, he’d have nothing more to say to his friend. When he added, ‘Not about the Kuba princess or anything else,’ I thought I sh-sh-should tell you to be on guard.”

“You’re sure he said ‘Kuba princess’?”

“Ho-ho-how else do you think I learned that you were Nyimi’s daughter?”

“Well...”

“You make me laugh, Tshala. Of course, I had some idea since the day you arrived at the Résidence Si-Si-Silvius Brabo. Like my brother Wendo says, there’s just something about you. You can’t put your finger on it, but it’s always there. In your eyes, your silences, everything.”

“Now we know what your brother is capable of, so—”

“Listen, little girl. I’m Munkutu, but I’ve been living in Léo for a long time. I s-s-see all sorts of people.”

“And so...?”

“So that necklace you wear...that figurine of a woman. Don’t tell me it’s just a pretty bauble.”

I smiled but tried to change the topic.

I said his brother’s music really did something to me. The singer was certainly the very best Léo had to offer in terms of rumba. If one day music became for Congo what wood and metal crafts were to my kingdom, then future generations would surely recognize Wendo Kolosoy as the genius who led the way. I hurried to add that, while it might come as a shock, I was

in love with a white man named René Comhaire. He was the only man I'd ever loved in my whole life. To say I missed him was a real understatement—nothing close to what I felt in my heart of hearts. Not hearing anything from him for more than a month was excruciating.

Ya' Akwesa shook his head sadly. He stared at the ground, as if searching for some shadow of an inspiration, then he reached out and clasped my hands in a gesture of great compassion.

When he again lifted his eyes to mine, he declared that he had no right to judge my actions, much less the mists surrounding my feelings. Even if he was convinced that giving one's heart to a white man was about as smart as sowing grains of corn in a field of rocks, he hoped I'd face the many challenges ahead with courage.

"Among Bantu people like us, those with royal blood can bend, but ne-ne-never break. It's been that way since day triumphed over night in this land of our dreams, our utopia."

"I'm betting on something else, Ya' Akwesa. But I'm touched by your empathy."

"Nothing can offer you what your blood and your birth guarantee, little sister."

"Time will tell."

"Remember this: Next time you go the Kotaniongo market, take a good look at the man standing by the slaughterhouse, a red beret firmly on his head. He's always there in the same spot, you can't mi-mi-miss him."

"You mean the fool? The one called the Survivor of Saïo?"

"Yes, the Survivor of Saïo is his nickname. You can tell he's bent but not broken. Why? Because royal blood flows in his v-v-v—"

"In his veins?"

"Yes. But as I say every day, don't go to the trouble, you'll ju-ju-just wear yourself out, and for what, little sister. A woman who tries to help me fi-fi-finish my sentences just brings back memories I've chosen to bury for the rest of my days."

I'd noticed the man Ya' Akwesa was talking about when I'd been at the market. "An old soldier who lost a leg far, far away, and who we've

watched sink into madness since returning from the war. A brave guy,” Wendo Kolosoy had whispered. The two men seemed to have known each other forever. The singer offered the poor soul a few coins, which hadn’t managed to cheer him up. “You’ve lost your smile, Survivor of Saïo, that makes me said,” he’d chided. They’d gone on about some nonsense, something about a dog and his master that the fool said he was tracking down in Léo, and other things I couldn’t follow. We’d ended up going on our way, leaving the poor guy chatting with a kid who’d brought him something to eat in a raffia bag.

I promised my host that I’d do my best to hold my head high, come what may. After all, somewhere in Léopoldville there must be people worse off than a penniless girl who’d just gotten off the boat from Kasai. He replied that money never made anyone wiser, but only wise people knew where to dig up money and how to keep it. Ya’ Akwesa vowed he’d remain the big brother he’d always hoped to be. He also promised to calm his brother’s ardor: “He has all the women in Léo at his feet and still keeps chasing after shadows.”

[SKIP NOTES](#)

[1.](#) A traditional log drum, common to music from the provinces of Équateur and Kasai.

[2.](#) “Give me the pleasure, mademoiselle, you won’t regret it, not even for an instant!”

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Unfortunately, mentioning the challenges to come seemed only to hasten their arrival.

Barely a month later, the Kolosoy brothers lost their grandfather; they left the capital and returned to the patriarch's village. Mark decided not to replace his *boy*. He asked him to teach me a few recipes so I could fill in as the substitute cook.

The day after Ya' Akwesa's departure, the skies over Léopoldville opened, unleashing a downpour that lasted all day long, with violent winds that caused a lot of damage. Several houses in Kalina lost their roofs and windows. Trees crashed down on homes and blocked most of the avenues that gave the European town the splendor that so fascinated Wendo Kolosoy's brother. As night fell, avenue de la Brabançonne and boulevard Albert 1er were just fields of destruction and desolation.

Nature's outburst gave Mark the excuse he needed to set his evil plan in motion. He suggested I spend the night under his roof. I thought of the strange request he'd made several weeks before and declined his offer. But following the advice of his wise *boy* was one thing, actually leaving when no buses were running anywhere in the city was another. The bus station was closed. The native town would be cut off from the white neighborhoods for at least twenty-four hours, until the authorities could get the situation under control. I didn't need a sign from the gods to know that this was the night "it" would take place.

The trap.

First, the charming voice he suddenly started using that evening. He spent so much time explaining to me, the Negress who worked for him,

things that had nothing at all to do with me. Did I know the origin of the name Silvius Brabo that he'd given to his villa?

"According to a legend that goes back to the fifteenth century, in the waters near the town where my parents live there was a giant, Druoon Antigoon. Half man, half monster, that horrible creature demanded a toll from all ships that dared cross his path. Even worse, the giant cut off the hand of any man or woman who refused to pay. Then one day came a Roman centurion named Silvius Brabo. What do you think that brave warrior did? He was just as brave as those elite archers who served your great-great-grandfather King Mikope Woto II. So he challenged the giant to a duel to the death, then cut off the monster's right hand and threw it into the Scheldt, a river all Belgians know well. That's how the town where I was born got its name: Antwerpen, which in our language means 'thrown hand.' They say 'Anvers' in French. One of the most important ports in Europe."

I said nothing.

I could've told him stories about severed hands until the sun came up, even if no Kuba village bore a name that commemorated what happened when Mikope Woto II ascended to the throne—he was the monarch who reestablished our army and washed his deceased father's honor in blood.

Then there was how he carefully chose his words to besmirch his old friend, accusing him of having "sold" me to pay off a colossal, overdue debt. I'd be lying if I said that the accusation didn't affect me. After all, things with René had happened so quickly. Between what he'd say to me when we were alone in his bedroom and what he and his friend said to each other in a language I'd not learned in school—well, it was hardly impossible that my fate had been decided in transactions totally unrelated to matters of the heart. Thinking about it, could a white man who had everything going for him—power, youth, splendor—really fall in love with a Negress, even if she was a royal princess? What precedent was there for that?

Maybe René couldn't write to me now without going through his friend-cum-enemy, but then why hadn't he—who'd declared one day that "the

heart must not follow colonial reason and submit to the aberrant injunctions of a myth we call civilization”—tried something else? Could my white prince from the kingdom of Kunyaza really be unaware of how the woman who’d sacrificed her innocence for him was suffering? Maybe my friend Kisita had been right after all when she tried to protect me from the phantom after which I so foolishly chased.

I’d placed all my faith in René.

A voice deep within me kept repeating that there was just one word to describe the person standing in front of me: Manipulator. Why would René Comhaire have paid off his supposed debt using some local girl as currency when his creditor could, like any other white who understood the extent of his power, choose any Black beauty himself? I couldn’t believe that my René’s velvety voice and irresistible smile hid a slave trader who was also a coward.

I let Mark ramble as the line of empty bottles of Chimay in front of him grew and the little hand on the clock followed its course, moving farther and farther from the number five, which was when I’d given up on making it back to Masina.

Had the artisans of my kingdom ever dreamed they’d have a white promoter? The Fleming could go on and on about what made Kuba art unique: “Many only see the beauty—admittedly striking—of the *ndop*, those royal effigies sculpted in wood that your father, like his predecessors before him, happily offered to his important visitors. I saw one in London last month, by the way, a real beauty—I’d have happily given my last dime for it. Others swear by the textiles woven from raffia. I don’t disagree that they’re the pillars of the most original artistic tradition in Central Africa today. But, as I explained to Baron De Neuberg when we met in Brussels, nothing Bakuba artisans make now can rival the masterful metalwork of your most ancient treasures, like those war blades, including some I’ve touched with my own bare hands, which date back to the founding of the kingdom.”

Were Ya’ Akwesa and the Lumumbists getting ahead of themselves? In a monotone voice, with a sad and hesitant smile, the Fleming railed against

the impatience of the Congolese, which risked “bringing down the edifice so patiently constructed by generations of colonizers since Henry Morton Stanley. We have in fact moved mountains, but much remains to be done. This land is as vast as all of western Europe. A civilization isn’t transferred with just a wave of the hand—it can take centuries, Tshala. When you finally begin your studies, you’ll learn about the Arabs, the Persians, the Greeks...”

His monologue went on all evening.

Until he burst into the guest room where I’d gone to sleep. Outside, the rain was bringing the capital to its knees. Violent winds shook trees, made electric poles shudder, rattled windows and the metal roof on the wooden shed in the garden. Lightning traced fiery arabesques on the bedroom walls, glowing scars that lit up the room and then disappeared, only to return a few seconds later. Ever more ardent, more imposing. The stage was set. I’ll never forget anything about that night. Nothing. Like the noxious air I breathed in, it’s all been trapped inside me, lodged in each corner of my memory. The stench of tobacco and alcohol, and the red glow of acacia wood slowly burning in the hearth.

He put out his last cigarette and let himself fall onto the bed.

First he tried a carrot, promising me heaven and earth. He received a firm, but polite, refusal. Then the stick, threatening me: “I want to be crystal clear: if you don’t go along with this, don’t count on me being patient enough to wait till dawn to drag you to the police station where one of my friends is posted. Believe me, Jan Peeters is anything but a choirboy. I consume Negresses...he prefers to tear off their teats to teach them good manners. You’re smart enough to understand that a servant who steals cash from the bwana’s home won’t be treated like a princess by his men. Unless you’ve behaved shamelessly with several men like Comhaire who’re ready to rush in and save you.” I didn’t say a word.

I was already no longer there.

I was busy imagining the bitter tears monsieur would cry when I made him pay for the crime he was about to commit. He took my silence as a mark of disdain—and that he could not bear. Then there was no stopping

him, though I tried. He forced open my thighs. I resisted for all I was worth. He slapped me so hard my temple burned and blood flowed from my nose. When he tried to pin my hands over my head, I bit him on the wrist and drew blood. He punched me right on the chin. My mind grew dark under the extreme violence of the shock. I felt no more pain. All free will deserted my body. There was no more Tshala. Between those four white walls, an animal in rut went wild on a marionette.

Nothingness.

How long did I endure it? I have no idea and never will. But the next day I saw the bitter fruit Mark De Groof harvested. It was Sunday and my nocturnal tormentor wanted to go to Mass. A practicing Catholic, maybe he wanted to salvage what little conscience he could by appealing to the Lamb of God who washes away the sins of the world. Since monsieur was not the sort who'd leave his beautiful residence looking like a bum, he nonchalantly headed to the bathroom for a refreshing shower.

If only he'd known!

As soon as the water hit his penis, the song and dance began. Nothing like "Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, the wonder of all wonders," which he'd gone on about the night before. An entirely different register. His genitals were itching like nothing the old pig had ever felt before. He started scratching. How could he have known—he had no idea what was causing the pain—that the more he scratched, the worse the itching would get? So bad that he'd scratch until he was bloody and raw, with not one second of relief. How could he imagine this was just the start of a long trail of tears, an agony that nothing in the entire pharmacopeia of the White Man's medicine could soothe? All he could do was keep scratching.

Nonstop.

No man before had ever succeeded in overcoming that urge—it almost drove them to self-mutilation. When the bug got you, your one and only duty was to get rid of the vermin. All day. All night. Everywhere. There was no shelter on this Via Dolorosa, no way to lighten the burden of the cross, which came down to just three words: bleed, howl, curse. From pharmacy to pharmacy. No hint of a remedy.

Hell on earth.

While he writhed in pain on his bed, cursing me as a dirty witch, threatening me to make me pay dearly, ever so dearly, for giving him some nasty Negro bug, I rushed outside. Happily, the city's work crews had been out at the crack of dawn and traffic was starting to flow. On the bus back to Masina, surrounded by passengers chatting about the football match two days before between AS Vita Club and CS Imana, I tried to recollect what had happened the previous night. It was all clear, right up until Mark punched me hard on the jaw, after I'd planted my teeth in his right wrist, just below his watchband. Not for a second did I regret the precautions I'd taken.

I remembered the last night of our initiation in the heart of the Bena Nyimi forest. I was going on fourteen. I could see Ma' Kabedi, the high priestess—tall, haughty, and so charismatic. Just before we returned to Mushenge, she gave each of the thirty-six adolescent girls something she called the “leaf of memory.”

I could still hear her words, the lesson she shared in our language: “The world, my daughters, is filled with ignorant fools who've retained nothing of their humanity but the carcass Bumba Chembe, the Creator, gave them. They are in fact pigs...Don't laugh, my daughters. What those mindless rogues do isn't funny at all. To combat those males incapable of honoring the source of life, incapable of seducing a woman and sharing with her the sweet honey of sexual union, our foremothers bequeathed us this leaf which I give you today. Wherever you go, take it with you. Whether in the house of some stranger who's offered you a mat in a foreign land or the home of a family friend whose attentions are suspect, his gaze lecherous, the leaf of memory will be your last resort. It won't protect you from rape—and you'd be wrong to complain about that—no one's ever claimed that's its purpose. But, my daughters, it will inflict an unforgettable life lesson on your betrayer. As soon as you fear a possible attack, just cut off a bit of the leaf, a

tiny little piece that you'll put deep into your vagina. The leaf will have no effect on you, I promise. But woe to the man who dares penetrate you against your will, whether by ruse, surprise, or violence. Once his deed is done, as soon as his sex touches water, he'll start to itch—an itch so bad no human can bear it.

“This torment will last for days, my daughters, maybe weeks. Going from bad to worse, defying all imaginable cures, until the guilty party is treated by a Kuba priestess who's inherited, as has the servant of Nyimi speaking to you now, the power of reparation. After a heavy fine is paid, the princess will go to the sacred forest and gather the ingredients—a secret transmitted from mother to daughter, from generation to generation. Then she'll prepare a brew and give it to the repentant. Upon drinking the ancestral potion, the beast will immediately need to urinate. Once he does, the pig will regain his smile. But believe me, my daughters, never will that man forget that attacking a member of the supposedly weaker sex may be the most dangerous of acts. And for that precise reason, the leaf I'm giving you is called the leaf of memory. Keep it with you always, wherever you go; whether fresh or dried, it will always serve its purpose. That makes you laugh? Your tormentor will not remember ever having laughed in his life, or my name is not Kabedi, daughter of Chikala.”

Ma' Kabedi also gave us pieces of tree bark that could be made into a brew to prevent unwanted pregnancy. I remembered too late that I'd left the package containing the contraceptive at the nuns' school. Without the ancestral remedy, I silently prayed for the Virgin Mary to protect me from the worst.

What I couldn't know was how Mark would react after moving heaven and earth to put an end to his violent itching. I hid in Masina, expecting each morning that the Public Force would pick me up and make me pay for what I'd put the head of the Établissements M. De Groof & G. M. De Neuberg through.

When my host got back from the village, I set my modesty aside and told him about the attack—although I didn't mention the punishment. He was truly upset and promised to come up with a plan before the master

sought revenge. We were both lucid enough to know we'd be hearing from Mark. After talking with his wife, who also treated me like her mother's daughter, Ya' Akwesa spoke again with me. First, he said that in the five years he'd known him, his boss had had a series of servants, usually chosen for their voluptuous curves. So many targets, he added, discarded after an unwanted pregnancy or once "the king of masks" found an even younger girl on one of his many trips away from the coast.

Then he said I could stay in their house as long as I wished. I burst into tears and ran to thank his wife. The good woman comforted me, insisting on her unconditional support. "The Kubas," she explained, "are honest people, they mean what they say. Your people always treated slaves captured on the battlefield better than others did, at least that's what's said where I come from. And then, since my older brother married a Kuba woman, you're my sister-in-law, Tshala. It's my duty to treat you like one. Besides, I'm honored to offer hospitality to a daughter of Nyimi!"

Clearly, the Kuba Kingdom, whose legends were passed down by generations of devoted *moaridi*, was not the hell described in the Holy Bible. Like elsewhere in the Belgian Congo, Bakuba slaves were slaves in name only—they were not marked in any way, they worked alongside their masters and were not subject to beatings because of their status. Still, no one claimed to be the descendant of a slave—and with good reason. But launching into a debate about it then and there would've been the height of stupidity, I'm sure you'll agree.

"Now, between us women," she continued, "I won't lie. If I weren't absolutely confident in my man, I never would've agreed to let you stay in my home. But if there are two husbands in Léo who deserve to be given communion without first going to confession, mine is one of them. To be perfectly blunt, three years ago Akwesa Kolosoy chose me as his one and only, in front of men and God, in the person of the parish priest of Saint-Alphonse."

After this impassioned speech—how I envied her optimism!—madame called to her brother-in-law Wendo and asked him to introduce me to the wife of one of their friends, a neighbor who sold food in the Kotaniongo

market. Her business was growing so fast she needed someone to help her. The singer quickly agreed, adding that since she was due to give birth soon, she might be very happy to have me with her at the stand. My hosts saw it as a way of keeping me out of Mark De Groof's reach, even if they had no illusions about how easy it'd be for the Belgian to find me in Léo.

At the entrance to the market we met the poor soul my host and benefactor had spoken about at the party thrown by the journalist Joseph-Désiré Mobutu. Kotaniongo and the sprawling dump next to it must have been his kingdom. It was the first time I'd seen him up close and it was impossible not to be impressed by his stature. A force of nature, starting to show signs of the passage of time but, clearly, still vigorous and strong. About fifty, with graying hair, a full beard, bloodshot eyes, and a dirty red beret clamped on his head, he held a burning gas lamp in one hand, even though the sun was at its highest. He was leaning on his crutches, his head slightly tilted to the right. The colossus diminished by the loss of a leg was chatting with a kid in a school uniform. In three leaps, he left the boy and stood before us.

He called out to the rumba singer.

"What're you doing in Léo, Wendo Kolosoy? I thought you'd listened to me when I was snoring under the rain, that you'd sucked up my farts with the morning storm. They tantalize you with their wars, but then you're left saying 'cheers' with your flies, Wendo. Does this city matter more to you than the skin on your ass? *Kokamwa!*^[1] Your head's stuck up your ass, my brother! Get your dusty butt in gear before the toad's spit soaks your penis, you hear me! Even my young friend Marcel Ntsoni, who dreams of dying as a writer, is smarter than you. They'll get you like they got me, and not because you weren't warned!"

"They'll take everything but my voice, Survivor of Saïo. From you, they took everything but your royal blood, which proves they're not as fearsome as my people think."

“You’re right about that, Wendo Kolosoy. They took my leg. Just a bit of meat. They can’t drain my blood. It’s as red as Hiroshima and they wouldn’t know what to do with it: The Congo River is flooding and Mami Wata, who loves jazz more than anything, wants some palm wine—nothing less. But you, my brother, don’t give ‘em a chance to skin you alive and steal your voice. Follow the lizard’s example.”

“What does the lizard have to teach me, Survivor of Saïo?”

“Everything. I was just telling my young friend Marcel Ntsoni that he should write it all down in his first book about orgasms and corn alcohol. He’ll write under Mami Wata’s embrace, once he’s mastered the art of taking a piss on the usurper’s tongue. There’s no glory or honor unless your anger is as relentless as an atomic bomb, did ya’ know that? When our cousin the gecko is cornered, it sacrifices its tail to save its skin. You, my brother, want to sail off on the eyes of that young beauty beside you. You’re ready to sacrifice your skin to honor your insatiable cock. You’re pitiful.”

“You’ve got some funny plans for me, Survivor of Saïo. I’m an honest singer, and this beauty is the sister my mother failed to give me before she joined the dead in the land where no one wears hats.”

“Don’t say stupid things, Wendo, or I’ll call down lightning and hot pepper on you right now. Right now! Neither your mother nor you know anything about this young thing with the spicy breasts. I can see it in the whites of your eyes, like a penis standing at attention.”

“Go on, that’s enough talk. Here, take this for your lunch. Hot sun and fasting aren’t a good combination on Léo’s streets.”

He gave him a few coins. The man put them in his pocket, then came closer to me. He looked carefully at my necklace.

“You shouldn’t wear that necklace, young lady.”

“And why not?”

“That...that’s a question for the wild parrot. He’s our cousin, and he knows.”

“What parrot?”

“The cousin knows it all. The cousin knows it’s no use resisting when the monkey wants to tear off your pants. Better just to watch how the

bastard does it, how he slips in his damned dick.”

Then he started to laugh, a full-body laugh that went on for a long moment—I thought it’d never end. A resounding laugh, from the bottom of his belly, and all the while he scratched his beard furiously and stared at me hard. Suddenly, he grew serious—he leaned on his crutches and took several steps back. He went as far as the newspaper kiosk and leaned against it. Then he began shouting as loud as he could: “I didn’t ask you for the dark side of the moon, my people. All I asked was one little thing: Show me where the little white guy and his puppy are hiding. I know they’re somewhere in the belly of oblivion, and I’m counting on you to find ‘em and castrate ‘em, one after the other—that’s my solar objective, my last mission here below. Castrate that little white shit and his puppy, and then turn them over to my friend Marcel Ntsoni, worthy son of this land cursed and widowed by the empire. To be sure the little white and his puppy pay for their big lie that they really hoped I’d forget, my friend here—who knows that you never come back unharmed after crossing the dunes of Abyssinia, whose parents come from opposite sides of Stanley Pool—will build them a tomb made of subjects, verbs, and objects, alongside a stream of ink, saliva, and blood. Then they’ll know that you don’t mess around with the proud mosquitoes of Congo. Meanwhile I, the Survivor of Saïo, I’ll store my lamp and my knife far from the giraffe hunters, I’ll hide castration’s family jewels in a safe place and then disappear—just like that. For I am a mosquito fart, my people. I don’t stink up the air, but I’m there, midway between the reason that shits and the stupidity that stinks of palm wine. My friend Marcel Ntsoni will tell you, since he’s already written it down in the heart of the book that’s taking shape in his little belly of a pubescent fetus. And my friend will also attest that when our paths first crossed in the neighborhoods around Léo in 1958—when he was eleven and already fueled by the infantry’s cigars, when I was living the high life among the trees and songs, smoking the calumet of war far from the stray dogs and other tellers of tall tales—he’ll say that when I appeared, me, the Survivor of Saïo, a lamp in one hand and a castrating knife in the other, I seemed lighter than a rhinoceros fart, and more alive than the parentheses of

sperm in which the little white and his puppy thought they'd trapped me with their pencils. For in truth, in truth I say, the master has nothing else over me than the power he draws from the patience I was taught by the clamoring of five thousand eight hundred and thirteen cadavers. And if all that's not enough for you, then hear this: I am a prince."

"A prince you are, and none would deny it," Wendo managed to slip in.

"A prince I am. My kingdom is in Abyssinia. Built of Italian flesh ground up by Stokes mortars. I defied my brother and my king. I crossed the seas. All the way to Saïo. More than a thousand kilometers on foot. From eastern Belgian Congo to the high plains of Ethiopia. Almost eight thousand men we were. Mosquito farts that stank of life, death, and resurrection. No one was betting on us. Not even Baudouin I, who, with a pompous burp loud enough to wake a warthog, refused to put stripes on our shoulders. Not even Monsieur Léo Pétillon, who wipes his ass with the wages meant for us gamy heroes. But you go have a glass of wine with General Pietro Gazzero. Just ask that Italian what happened to his brave soldiers at the maggot's great feast. I may disappear before I get to castrate the little white and his puppy, but not before I've gotten my last wages—I'm telling it to you straight, straight from my fragrant guts."

"The little white and his puppy are now in the land of the tsars while you, Survivor of Saïo, waste your breath under Léo's sun!"

"Tsars my ass! You know what, Wendo? Once you've let Baudouin I, de Gaulle, and Churchill see straight into the Nazis' guts, you can just die there where you're standing, for all they care, and before the cock's third cry—not after. Saint Peter lied to you. Me, I'm all for Lumumba tearing out our *dipanda* before dawn, using his teeth if need be. But my question for the prophet is quite simple, okay? Does that independence of his, which smells of beer and fries, come with my leg, my breastplate, and my wages, or does it arrive buck naked, like the nights back in Saïo?"

There was no longer a shadow of a doubt.

I was just about to embrace the light of day for the very first time when it happened. When my mother stepped between her husband and his younger brother. When Prince Osako committed the unpardonable and then

fled, running after shadows, a kite in the winds swirling above an impetuous river, swathed in mist, reaching out with his calloused blacksmith's hands for the battlefield whose contours would long haunt his wife's nights, even as they remained a mystery for his whole family.

Because I'd never seen him, I hadn't recognized him. There was no image of the Unbowed in my parents' home. The closest we had to a photo, according to my father, was his eldest son, who'd been one of the most gifted apprentices of his generation before abandoning the forge when he was enrolled at the school of the Scheut missionaries. Now there he was—all but one leg of him—right in front of me. In the heart of Léopoldville. His exile from the Kuba Kingdom was equal to the sum of the seasons of the woman I'd become. A thousand drums began to beat in my heart. My eyes burned. There, in front of a frozen Wendo Kolosoy, I burst into tears.

"Tell me about your brother and king whom you defied, Survivor of Saïo."

"And why should I do you such a great honor, young lady?"

"I want to know."

"You want to know...The pretty city girl sees the dog scurrying naked in broad daylight and asks the blind man I've become whether the animal is male or female. Her mouth speaks for what night?"

"Please tell me about your brother the king."

"Why don't you ask the parrot? He also spoke to the little white and his puppy. Don't you know how to read in the mirror of the wound?"

"What parrot are you talking about?"

"If you don't know what parrot the Survivor of Saïo is talking about, what gives you the right to wear that figurine around your neck?"

"Do you know...Do you recognize this figurine? Do you know this woman and the eternal spirit she represents?"

He turned to the young man silently listening to us and snapped: "Come here, my friend Marcel Ntsoni. This time we will draw up, under the guidance of Ntotila-dia-Kongo, the plans of my divine sepulcher. A tomb that will stand at the foot of life and reveal to all posterity the three fellows the earth brought forth, much to our sorrow: the one the master calls money,

the one that always stands stiffly and walks between his two soft cousins, and, finally, the leader of the three, she who is wet from morning to night, eight days a week. And if anyone ever heard that a child raised his hand to his father, that a man of sound mind took his brother's life, or that in the presence of the elders, a madman stood on his feet and crowed like a rooster, let them not waste any time beating around the bush: The guilty party is among the three I've just named. That's the bare-naked truth that my divine sepulcher will reveal to posterity, as soon as I answer 'here' to the call of my seven solitudes."

"For the love of god, will you tell me, Survivor of Saïo, if this pendant conjures any memory buried in your mind?"

"Daughter of Lumumba's Congo, neither land nor sky exist any longer. All that was before has ceased to be. And here's proof: Despite its fury, the sun let you sacrifice the nubile princesses whose breasts stood proudly behind you. Who'd have believed it?"

[SKIP NOTES](#)

[1.](#) "I can't get over it!"

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Since witnessing the face-off between the man called the Survivor of Saïo and myself, Wendo Kolosoy kept peppering me with questions. He wanted to know everything about life at my father's court. About the Bakuba sacred rituals, the narrative ballets, and other costumed parades he'd heard so much about—things he'd previously chalked up to idle chatter.

After running through the whole gamut of questions, the singer always came back to the parrot evoked by my uncle's errant ghost, the royal prince living on charity in a city that treated him like garbage from the Kotaniongo market—so far, in so many ways, from Mushenge.

That morning, I was telling him again—at the risk of repeating myself—that no initiate could reveal the secrets of our rites of passage to any man, even if he was a rumba singer with only the most noble of intentions. I was standing in front of the house, wasting my breath trying to get him to accept that, when a police car pulled up, sirens blaring. In less time than it takes for me to say this, four armed men hopped out, right along with Ya' Akwesa. All our neighbors—men and women, young and old—quickly retreated into their shacks, barricading themselves in as best they could. I understood that “the king of masks” had made his move.

Much to my surprise, I wasn't hauled off to the police station but to the offices of the Établissements M. De Groof & G. M. De Neuberg—in a part of the white town I'd never set foot in before. I was taken to a room

on the fifth floor with a view of the Congo River. Night's destructive shroud would soon spread over the capital, multiplying the strength of the powerful and further limiting the places where the dominated could drown their frustrations, propped up by a dream even more oppressive than all their back-breaking humiliations.

Through the bay window I could see boats, like little matchboxes going back and forth across Stanley Pool, as clouds of gulls flitted around a sky flecked with listless, ash-gray clouds. Along the shore of Brazzaville, the capital of the French Congo, the last rays of a fading sun glistened on the wide expanse of the busy river and its water hyacinths, an image of luxury out of reach for all but a few of the natives in Léo. Then flickering lights spread along the uneven shore, which glimmered as if lit by a bush fire.

Swathed in silence, the landscape projected a striking mix of magic and calm. A world out of this world. A sight that, in the fluttering of an eye, could make you forget that the land you were standing on could shift beneath your feet at any moment. That you lived in a city where a melody composed by an incorrigible seducer could make allies of men in cassocks and those with military decorations, each trying to determine the sex of the Angel of the Apocalypse. And that if you were that dark-skinned angel, you could follow the river's flow toward exile, never knowing if it would ever end, or even leave you a voice so that you might still pretend you were a Black god at an ungodly bacchanal.

Mark came into the room with a slight Black woman about my mother's age. I immediately noticed that the Belgian was no longer scratching. No visible signs of nervousness. The same cigar was still dangling from his fingertips—as it almost always had since I'd arrived at the Résidence Silvius Brabo. He thanked the two police officers who'd brought me, adding that they could let the *boy* go. After a "Yes, boss," snapped out in unison, the two men disappeared down the stairs.

Not even the shadow of an emotion on the Fleming's face. After snubbing out the cigar in the black wooden ashtray, he waved a hand in the woman's direction: "Princess Tshala Moelo, let me introduce Eudoxie Nbombasi, the head cook at the school Les Cendrillons de Kalina. Eudoxie

is Yombe, from near the mouth of the river, but she often helps me with my business. There are very few aspects of Kongo statuary art she's not familiar with. Two months ago, when I hesitated about acquiring a piece for my new collection, a figurine from the greatly desired series *Kongo Maternity*, I turned to Eudoxie Ndombasi."

He paused for a moment but kept his eyes fixed on me.

As if he were expecting me to react to this introduction, which had only thickened the air of mystery surrounding the woman. Why was she there and what was her connection to why Mark De Groof had me brought there from the native town? Mark De Groof paused to enjoy the look of surprise on my face; after a few seconds, he cut short the suspense. "Eudoxie Ndombasi is not just a talented cook. I won't go on about everything that makes this Muyombe woman a formidable Negress, but I thought it wouldn't be bad to introduce you to the one who managed to counteract the poison you gave me. I'm talking, of course, about the leaf of memory, as you call it in Kuba land. Now that you can put a face on my benefactress, I'll ask her to leave. You and I need to discuss other things that have nothing to do with the weakness of the flesh."

Eudoxie Ndombasi raised her right hand—her hesitant gesture a signal to the man trying to extract himself from his leopard-skin armchair. Mark ran a hand through his mop of hair, inhaled slowly, and said, "When she gave me the antidote, I promised Eudoxie Ndombasi that I would pardon you. Although we sit here in this room breathing the same air, we both know you should be either a couple of meters below ground or in one of the darkest places in Léo, if you know what I mean...But while our Walloon friends may claim that a Fleming and a wolf have but one soul between them, this rather repulsive mug of mine—at least that's how many of the women I've crossed paths with have described it—doesn't reflect the true me. You have my word. And you are pardoned, Tshala. We'll have a fresh start this evening. Eudoxie, you can leave with a clear conscience. Go take care of your family. Nothing bad will happen to this charming creature."

Without saying a word, the mysterious Kongo lady departed. Mark followed her out, shutting the door behind him. I heard their steps moving

off and then silence, nothing but the whir of the big fan at the back of the room.

A thousand questions swirled in my mind. Just who was she? By what miracle had she managed to get her hands on the antidote that was one of the best-guarded secrets of the Kuba priestesses who led our initiation ceremonies? Could I really believe a man who'd already betrayed an old friendship and seemed guided by only his lesser instincts? What had become of our shared friend, without whom I would surely have become the daughter-in-law of Mwant Yav, the powerful Balunda king in Katanga? At the end of January 1958, we shared a bed. Now it was the end of March. Did René Comhaire even remember the feel of my body, the burning coals the devil slipped under his skin when I, aching for his storms, lapped up the sweet nectar, promise of tempests to come?

Deep in the pocket of my green skirt with white polka dots, the same one I'd worn to the party for the wedding anniversary of the journalist at *L'Avenir*, Joseph-Désiré Mobutu, my hand felt a bit of crumpled paper. On it was scribbled the address of Patrice Lumumba's office. Of course, I'd never given a second thought to his invitation. Truth be told, not only because I loved another but because—however strange this may sound—in my memory, I didn't like his cologne. His invitation to dance had caught me off guard, and I'd managed to put up with the smell while we rumbaed in the Léo-Bisengo, but even if he succeeded in seducing me, I couldn't see sharing a moment of intimacy and musk with that dashing politician, given the smell of whatever ointment he had on him.

That said, with the precipice now looming ahead, I realized that if there was anyone in the country who could pull off a miracle and rescue me, it was the famous leader, then the business manager of Bracongo, one of the main brewing companies in the country. Rumor had it he was about to create his own political party, one that would unite people of every ethnicity from across Congo, from north to south, east to west—a feat no one had dared dream of. But how could I contact him? If he'd at least added a phone number, I could've used the phone that sat in the place of honor in the room

where I was being held, between a harp crafted in wenge wood and a drum adorned with strings of cowries.

I had to accept the facts: I couldn't count on help from René Comhaire or Patrice Lumumba, and certainly not from my father. I was really and truly on my own.

Night had long fallen when I finally heard steps coming back up the stairs. I'd been left alone to contemplate the lights that flickered and danced over the riverbed, like so many finely gilded seas hells. Alone to think about the path I'd followed from Mushenge. To imagine those taken by Prince Osako, before he sank into madness. To wonder if there was some way to foil the oracle's prediction of bad luck for the nubile princesses of the Kuba Kingdom, a promise my uncle had reiterated when he saw the figurine of Queen Mother Ngokady.

Mark came into the room, followed by three men. I recognized two of the four agents from before. The third was a white man, much older than Mark. The telephone rang just as the four walked in. Mark grabbed it brusquely, almost knocking the harp off its ivory pedestal. I could only catch his last few words, words in French, because first he'd gone on at length in his native language.

"René Comhaire? No idea.... Are you surprised? Wait.... You remember Albert Comhaire, the religious nut who worked for Edmund Morel at the turn of the century? The anthropologist from Namur who was all over the London papers, denouncing the colonial mission as a huge scam that history would indict on the worst of crimes? Well, René is his grandson.... I'll just say that more than one expert thought they'd detected the voice of that traitor Albert Comhaire behind some of the most serious accusations in the infamous report sent to the signatories of the Treaty of Ber.... No doubt about it: He collaborated on that report before publishing signed articles in different London publications between 1904 and.... What I've been trying to tell you from the start is that for the Comhairens,

hatred of the monarchy and skepticism about our mission in Central Africa have no—...They've always been a gang of anti-colonialists, if that's the word you're looking for.... So in his letters to his parents, the one you call my 'close adviser' tosses off fine phrases that the cabinet deems unacceptable. Is that really a surprise?...Communist sympathies, René Comhaire? Why not add that he's a Mason while you're at it?...A friend of Patrice Lumumba? Lumumba's friends are the liberals in Belgium, you know that.... Except if you'd done your homework, you'd have found the thread between them and then—...Are you telling me that Monsieur Auguste Buisseret has no interest in the background of the Walloon administrators his government sends to the colonies?...I'm here with Commissioner Jan Peeters, whose only job is to crush the dirty niggers between two curfews, no—...Listen, I'm sorry, I have to get ready for a trip. I've given you enough help already. Besides, I've lost track of that Comhaire of yours.... Why don't you go through official channels? Contact Governor Pétillon, good lord!...Yes, precisely. No need to thank me!... Hello? Hello?"

He'd barely hung up when the phone rang again. This time he spoke just in French.

"Hello?...Very well, thank you, my dear baron, who holds the world in the palm of his hand.... I'll be back in Léo on April 17, opening day of the World's Fair.... Well, um, if that grand marshal of yours wants it to work, he'll have to dive in himself.... He's irritated with you, from what I read in the paper.... Here in Africa, I've done my duty without any guarantee from the people at the ministry, and you know what? I have no desire to bankrupt myself with legal fees for some case—...Officially, I know nothing about that famous village of yours. You might just as well have named it the 'Congo Circus' or, if you were in the service of Queen Elizabeth II, the 'Zoo of Sri Jayawardenapura.'...What am I afraid of? I'm just a collector of primitive art, not a representative of the Ministry of the Colonies! What about you? Do you still want to put your name on the biggest art gallery in London or do you plan to return to politics on the night of October 19?...I am quite calm, my dear baron. As calm as the river above Stanley Falls,

which you must visit one day. That is, once Lumumba stops taking himself for the new Abraham Lincoln of the cannibals who crave mussels and beer, if you know what I mean.... Your friend the bow-tied banker doesn't want to get his hands dirty, I understand that. A pretty face, smooth talk, and that's about all, if you want my opinion.... Yes, I want to see them as soon as I get off the plane. I'll give them the package and then you can figure it out. In any event, this conversation never happened. I'll see you soon, baron! Please kiss your wife and the kids for me. Bye!"

Then the police officers tied me up. I tried to resist, but I hadn't eaten anything all evening and I felt myself growing weaker. With help from the man giving the orders, my brothers bound me and put me in handcuffs. I found myself lying in a ball on the backseat of a truck owned by the Établissements M. De Groof & G. M. De Neuberg.

On the way from Mark's offices to the airport, a blindfold kept me from seeing any glimmer of light, any silhouette. My last memories of my last night on African soil come down to the words I heard at the start of the journey that would take me to Belgium. First, from the mouth of Mark De Groof: "You made my life hell for seven days. Without Eudoxie Ndombasi, I would've done the unthinkable. I could've returned the favor, but I had a better idea. An idea that came to me simply because I'm a wise businessman, not some two-bit vigilante. I know that when King Baudouin brings down the curtain on the 1958 World's Fair in Brussels, you'll be looking all over to thank me for making you far more famous than your prince charming Antoine Wendo Kolosoy here in Léo. But I don't want your gratitude, my Bamboula princess. Because of you, the man I thought was my friend has paid dearly for his lack of loyalty. Believe me, that's quite enough to make me happy."

The last words were spoken by the older of the two Black police officers. When he was taking off my handcuffs and helping me to my feet, I heard him mumble in Lingala: "My sister, Eudoxie Ndombasi told us who you are. If it's true you have royal blood in your veins, the White Man will make you bend but will never break you. Even in *mputu*,^[1] the spirits of the ancestors will watch over you. They know no borders, aren't limited by

deserts or seas. As long as you are faithful to them, my sister, believe me, they'll be like a shield protecting your breast. Be strong and never lose hope."

The truth of the matter, however, was that my presence in the belly of the plane that was about to take me far away from the heart of Africa was incontrovertible proof of my betrayal of Queen Mother Ngokady's memory. Nothing could stand in the way of destiny's fateful march. Not the eternal blessing my father had placed on my newborn head—"You will be a man, my daughter!"—nor my encounter with my now silent companion in the Laeken cemetery, who is none other than Robert Dumont, nicknamed the bow-tied banker, the father of your Belgian friend.

A friend who helped you undo the knots of a history whose details escaped you until you landed on European soil. And that, my Ndoyi, is why fate brought you together. It's also the only favor the wild parrot—the totemic animal you and I share—granted me when I made my hasty departure from Mushenge: to await the birth of another Nyota and lead her to my tomb. If your father hadn't sent you on a quest for a fine Belgian diploma, the spirit entrusted with my fate would've found some other pretext to wrest you from Congo. He had to restore harmony by resolving his secret plot.

While my journey took me to the base of the Atomium in Brussels, that iconic monument to which our totem led you after your arrival in Belgium, I let the flow of time knit the final stitches of my fate.

**EXPO 58:
FORTY-FIVE
YEARS LATER**

Nyota Kwete, the granddaughter of Kena Kwete III, arrived at the Zaventem airport one morning in August 2003, along with twelve singers, eight dancers, six percussionists, four *atalaku*^[2] in extravagant outfits, and some twenty other men and women who played less clearly defined, but essential, roles in Balya Ngando, the group led by the Maestro.

Once through the last checkpoint, the Congolese star, a Belgian citizen equally fluent in the language of Jacques Brel and that of his own ancestors, passed her off to his mistress from Brussels—the woman everyone who was anyone in the Schengen Area called, with a mix of affection and deference, Mamie Solution. About forty years old, very dark-skinned, covered in jewels from head to toe like a Christmas tree, Mamie Solution had taken care of everything from that point on with an efficiency matched only by her sense of timing. The apartment Nyota would share near the Namur Gate—she’d found it. As well as the Belgo-Moroccan lawyer who’d prepare the dossier for her first appointment at the immigration office. And the temporary working permit Nyota received from that same office, to tide her over while she waited for the illusive and oh so highly desired status of political refugee—also her. Meanwhile, two jobs, off the books. First, as an assistant aesthetician in a salon on Place Louise, and then as a customer-service representative in a supermarket in the Schaerbeek section of Brussels. As for enrolling at the university, that would have to wait until she had the appropriate visa.

Week after week, the woman who ran both the restaurant L’Apogée du Manioc and the men’s clothing boutique Zaba Valeur & Co. on the Chaussée de Wavre in Matonge, Ixelles, burnished her reputation as the most influential impresario of the whole Congolese diaspora on the old continent. She never missed a thing—so Nyota thanked her stars that, after so many dead ends, she’d finally listened to her older sister’s boyfriend from Kinshasa. For six thousand euros, the Maestro could get her a Belgian visa.

Once in the land of the *noko*,^[3] he'd put her "in good hands." What happened after that would depend as much on her own good luck as on the ancestors' caprices.

Three months went by.

The end of autumn was signaling the start of Nyota's first winter in Europe and she still had no idea where to start. To what saint or devil should she pray before beginning her search for her missing relative, swallowed up by forty-five years of silence with not the slightest sign of life.

When she was saying her goodbyes at the N'djili International Airport, her father—who'd avoided her eyes, as if any visual contact might bring bad luck—gently whispered, "All we've gotten from the rumors, which have been souring our lives for years now, is that she likely worked for a man called 'the king of masks.' Mark De Groof. Rumor has it he was a Fleming with a shop on boulevard Albert 1er, in front of the central train station, between the Hotel Regina and the headquarters of ONATRA, the transportation office, which was then called OTRACO. It seems they flew to the metropole together, sometime between February and March in 1958. We have no pictures of him, which makes it more complicated. In the big gray envelope you'll find a photo of her taken by the sisters of Sainte-Marie-de-la-Miséricorde in September 1957. That's all that the king, your grandfather, brought with him from Mushenge. You also have a photo of the district administrator, Monsieur René Comhaire, a Walloon. The director general of the National Archives found it, quite by chance, at the bottom of a drawer no one had opened for God knows how long. The Bible-thumping preacher from the Église des Rachetés de Golgotha insists it's a sign—but he also promised your mother that the God of Abraham would send one of our two daughters a rich and famous husband. I'm at a loss, Nyota. You know as well as I do that in this town, if a politician doesn't take you down, it's because God already sawed off your legs.

“Whatever the case, your priority is your studies and nothing else. You’ll come back with a doctorate in political science from the most prestigious university in Belgium, and then you’ll go into politics. I’ll just say that the *noko* are the champions of organization. The mess we’ve made here since independence is inversely proportional to their attention to details when it comes to archives—that’s what your grandfather would say, and he knows them better than any of our current leaders. Maybe there’s a chance, a very slim chance, that some office has a record of the two thieves we’re looking for, or maybe you’ll run into someone who knew one or the other. A relative, a friend, a former colleague who’s happily retired in Liège or Namur, which isn’t that far from the capital, it seems. And if not, well, neither the king nor I will hold it against you. This all happened so long ago. Your grandfather’s convinced we’re being punished for something that only you might figure out, my brilliant daughter. If nothing else, the *moaridi* of the Nyimi court will attest from one generation to the next that your grandfather, Kena Kwete III, never stopped trying.”

She knew her father well enough to know he wasn’t wrapping his request up in so many layers of warnings just to upset her. This mystery, now several decades old, was the abyss that pulled in each member of the family, except for the younger ones born far from the shores of the Kasai River. And the Kuba prince who’d become a noncommissioned officer in the national police knew full well that the weight of the mission given to the first of the Kwete to set foot on the soil of the former colonial power was too much for the frail shoulders of a twenty-six-year-old student to bear.

That’s what was running through Nyota’s mind as her three roommates were in the living room discussing the Maestro’s latest show with Balya Ngando at the famous Bataclan in Paris; and then she got a call from Mamie Solution.

It was already after midnight.

She was lying in her bed, a copy of the play *La Mort d’Oluwémi d’Ajumako* on her stomach. With no preamble, her benefactress just announced straight out that she’d found her a hell of a job. “You aren’t going to believe me, Nyota, no, this is nothing like that thing about being

the nanny for a Gabonese diplomat, forget about that. Nothing stingier than a Gabonese, forget about that. Did I steal my nickname Mamie Solution? Would the Maestro have become the Maestro without Mamie Solution? *Naloba, naloba te!*^[4] No joking around. He was a *sapeur* unlike any other, but I made him into an Artist, tried and true. I was his muse, and I worked my way up to being an impresario. You want the details? I'm talking about a job, off the books, working for whites, okay? A job like that, young Belgian girls your age would fuck their old man for this offer, my beauty. Here it just falls into your lap barely a month after I managed to get you a temporary work permit. Imagine that! Those gris-gris of your ancestors the Nyimi back in the Sankuru are really strong! If you marry a member of the Belgian royal family next summer, I won't even be surprised."

Nyota was skeptical.

So why couldn't this job, for which young Walloon and Flemish girls would commit incest, be done according to the rules? That way she'd be paid at the official rate, not like in Schaerbeek where the manager said he couldn't understand why she went to the trouble of wearing a bra day in and day out, and promised restaurant meal coupons as a bonus if she'd "make a little effort." Oh, she'd wanted to kill that man!

Mamie Solution replied that, yes, this would still be off the books, but the next one, provided the employer was satisfied, would be on the up-and-up. Nyota would have a work permit and a number on file with ORBEM—the Brussels Regional Employment Office. She'd pay into unemployment insurance, because you have to plan for shrinking labor markets, since the deficit run up by the socialists really wasn't looking good. "Did you hear about what happened in the town of Charleroi? The socialists got into power. That's what's going to happen everywhere. And who do you think will be the first to toast to that? Foreigners." In the meantime, her protégée needed to keep her eyes open. This was Belgium, and they were two women from Congo. "*Naloba, naloba te*. With all they sucked out of us since Léopold II, we'd be real fools not to take back a little between two legislative reforms. The Malians have got it down—they've colonized the region around Paris, sucking France dry and modernizing their villages

back in the Sahel, while we Congolese are still bleaching our skin white in Matonge.”

Mamie Solution asked if she knew where the car show would be taking place—its grand opening was set for the following morning. Did she know which metro to take to get to the Atomium, in what used to be Laeken. “Everyone knows where the Atomium is,” Nyota replied, before adding that she hadn’t yet visited that iconic monument of Europe’s capital. The girls who lived with her spent their time gossiping about some singer from the Maestro’s group, who was cuckolding his star by carrying on with some dancer, or chattering on about designer clothes. “They’d never mention a car show. They’re only into Gucci’s latest creations. Luxury cars—Lord, they wouldn’t say no, but that’s not what they’re dreaming about...”

Nyota wanted to know what it was about this job that meant they couldn’t wait to see each other sometime after the sun rose. “Mamie Solution, you’re acting like the Archangel Gabriel announcing the miracle of the Nativity to the Virgin Mary, *loba toyoka!*^[5] No, seriously, can you believe these people from the car show, trying to hire just a few hours before the event? Are Africans the ones behind this thing? Because when it comes to screwups, we’re hard to beat. Did you see yesterday, a couple celebrating their wedding who invite people for eight p.m. and then don’t even show up themselves until one a.m., all smiles and excuses? *Mbadi!*^[6]”

But Mami Solution wasn’t having any of it. “You’re talking to me about fools getting married and I’m talking about a white man’s business and a white man’s wages. Are you even listening? The job, I was getting to that if you’d just let me finish. Just hold on, my beauty, because for seven euros an hour—and yes, I said seven because I’m deducting my cut from the twenty they’re going to give me, right—for seven euros an hour, all you have to do is show up at the fair grounds at ten a.m. and stay until nine p.m. That’s it.”

This was just crazy. Were they really going to pay someone to do nothing? No way, not if this was something white folks had cooked up. Hadn’t Mamie Solution told her time and time again that in her adoptive country, no white would pull out a kopeck without getting something in return, especially if the employee was a Black or a Mundibu.^[7]

“I think I know what a car show is, but I need more details.”

“It’s a big exhibition. All the big brands come to show off their new models and catch the eye of the customer. It’s as simple as that.”

“Okay, Mamie Solution. But me, what’s my job?”

“What they want from you, my beauty, is for you to stand where they tell you, to smile at the visitors, and to wait to put money in your pocket, and that’s it.”

“No, wait—”

“There’s no waiting, my beauty. The official opening is in just a few hours. You’ll be there with the Artemis Agency. Recruiting hostesses, that’s their business. They’re in the top three of all Belgium, which means they only want the best girls. Really hot chicks, so beautiful you’d think God regretted leaving any ugly behind down here and decided to make up for it with some creatures made to order. *Naloba, naloba te!*”

“*Nzambe nan gai*^[8]...Are you serious?”

“You were preselected based on your photo. Keep your phone on. Florence Planckaert, the director of Artemis, will call at about six a.m. The metro for the Atomium, it’s line 6, Roi Baudouin. If you go in the wrong direction, you’ll end up way over in Élisabeth. Now good night, my beauty!”

—

Nyota joined the eight teams of hostesses hired by the Artemis Agency for the annual event—this was the fiftieth year that the powerful Belgian automobile and motorcycle industry federation had held the show. The young woman from Congo was one of three Africans among the fifty-five hostesses posted throughout the various halls in Heysel. She was stationed in Hall 5 at the impressive Mercedes-Benz Belgium display, right at the very center of the park.

She lasted all of half a day.

After getting her uniform from the agency’s representative and then quickly heading to the dressing room, she expressed her discomfort with

wearing an ultra-miniskirt that clung all too tightly to her derriere. She was very self-conscious about that part of her body. She tried to get a longer skirt that would not draw so much attention to her curves, as well as a looser blouse that would shield her breasts from the lascivious stares she was sure to get. No, she did not want to get used to that.

The representative wanted nothing of it. “You can’t imagine the number of girls who’d do anything to be in your place—I mean, they dream of having half what you do without going under the knife. They’d fight tooth and nail to get into this hall wearing an Artemis uniform and be paid 720 euros for standing next to a shiny Benz C-Class for four days. And you just go on about modesty? No, you are really something, you Blacks! Listen, my dear, this job, you take it or leave it. I’ll just call Mamie Solution!”

Then the girl who was the head of her team—a young Fleming from Vilvoorde who spoke almost perfect French—came over to see what the problem was. She had a little talk with her in private. This was just four days, four very short days, and then it’d be over. Sometimes sacrifices had to be made when things were tight. “I have African friends who have to work hard to help their family back in the village—my boyfriend is Rwandan. Think of your family, think of the money, Nyota. This skirt bothers me, too, even if my behind, well, you’d have to find it first...But so what, things are what they are, as my mother would say. Come, let me help you put on the top. Camisoles like these are not at all obvious for those of us with big chests. I’m a 34 DD. You, too, I guess?”

Sadly, the worst of her fears had come to pass sooner rather than later. She’d been in the stand just two hours when two men came up. Mid-sixties, vintage English suits, the stiff gait of those who are carried along by the unbelievable numbers in their bank accounts. They know that, whatever they do, whether anyone finds out or not, no one will hold them accountable.

The one wearing a bowler hat and glasses with gold frames walked around the star of the show, the hot new CLK-Class in a dark aubergine, his eyes aglow. He’d get himself one for his sixty-fifth birthday, he exclaimed with a velvety voice. Now that he was older, with a little extra weight, he

knew there was nothing like the shocks of a beast like this to kiss the asphalt on a summer evening between Rhode-Saint-Genèse and Paris. His friend, who was standing near Nyota, replied that he had far better taste. Yes, the Germans knew something about cars, but if he had to choose shocks, he'd go for something more fun, like the beautiful African woman on display. "In case you didn't notice, well...let's just say the beast has quite a body! The beautiful Negress can't be more than twenty-five, but she's got class, damn! I'll ride her all night as if I were still twenty, my friend. No need for even one dose of Viagra, thank you very much!"

She glared at the creep then said the only reason she hadn't already thrown the bottle of mineral water in her hand at him was that he was older than her own father. Her old man had taught her good manners and led her to believe that Belgians knew how to behave.

That was too much! The pompous man burst out with a laugh. "You're offended by that little joke, my lovely lady? Belgians, Belgians, you say with your beautiful Congolese accent. There's no such thing as Belgians, don't you know? From Kinshasa to Brussels, *little miss*, there are just men who've bowed down to lust. You're from Congo, am I right? Of course, your father's right. Of course, those he calls 'Belgians' are wonderful people. You're here alongside other young beauties, so many Lolitas who've rejected the line of those radical feminists who get on their high horses just because of a picture of a woman next to a tricked-out car. You've got to live in the moment, say 'screw you' to all those moralizing mothers who race from a protest against a show they deem misogynist to a little private party of their own, shades down, drooling over a calendar featuring the firemen of Brussels. Those feminists want to have their cake and eat it, too. That's what those fanatics are all about. You young people want to make your own choices—you're right to be skeptical of them. You understand that the war of the sexes is just a big joke for the big, bad marketing machine. Let's be serious. No one here can tell me, in the name of any so-called feminism, that the beautiful behind of a Negress isn't a miracle of nature—it's not just some crap churned out in an Asian factory. But for anyone who really knows his stuff, my word, looking at a behind

like that is the most delightful torture known to man. Damn! You're about to burst the buttons on that skirt they lent you, little miss! Now, Mercedes-Benz didn't put you here in your birthday suit—this isn't some joke. This show is being held in Heysel, where Expo 58 took place. If you, a Congolese woman, were interested in the history of your adoptive country, you'd know this place already exhibited something far worse than the beautiful ass of an African hostess, believe me. But I imagine your father didn't send you here to get a doctorate in history—I'd be quite surprised if he did."

Then his friend intervened.

He apologized for any offense. His companion showed a lack of class. Blame it on that last glass of champagne he'd slurped down at their hotel on Place de Brouckère. Please don't hold it against him, the poor guy (he actually said "bugger"). The gentleman could brag all he liked, after three glasses of Moët & Chandon, he was quite tipsy. He lost control over his usually restrained words and fell headlong into the gutter.

He wanted to smooth things over and then get to the point. Enough going around in circles. What had drawn them to the German display was her, Nyota. What they wanted to know, in all discretion, was what she charged. "To be clear, *Mamzelle* Nyota—that's what I'm seeing there on the badge, Nyota—bottom line, what would you charge if I proposed a whole weekend in a beautiful apartment on the coast, in Blankenberge? There'd be four of us, my friend and I and then one of your colleagues—we can introduce her to you in a few minutes. She's from Cameroon, no, Nigeria, and she's over at the Ford Belgium display. She can vouch for us. We're good guys, family men, fathers—we invited her last year. Okay, she soaked our sheets like you can't imagine, but that's not the Nigerian's fault. She's a fountain of a woman and, believe me, that's not what you usually find at these sorts of shows. Or you can ask the Albanian woman over there at the Volvo stand, in a blue skirt and tights—she knows us, too. Nothing to fear. No bugs, no drugs, no police record, clean as a whistle! We pay half when we get to the coast, cash. We spend some good times eating petit-fours, with champagne, caviar. A lot of fun, if you know what I mean. On Sunday

evening, you get the other half, then we bring you back to Brussels like a princess in a BMW 330 Series, and we all go our separate ways. So, little miss, what would you charge for a red-hot weekend in a cold winter on the North Sea?”

She saw his hand reaching for her hip. With a quick move she pushed him back; rather, she slapped away the wandering hand just like, back in her country, you swat a brazen fly buzzing around a glass of beer.

Two drops of blood on the floor.

Her ring had cut the cad’s hand.

She turned and marched straight to the dressing room. On her way, there was a Black couple, about her parents’ age. The woman looked at her and sneered—she didn’t say a word, but Nyota could read it in her eyes: “You’re shaming us, my daughter. What bad mother sends her daughter to a place like this dressed like a whore?”

Then she found the woman from Artemis. Gave her back the red-and-black uniform and turned on her heels—she didn’t even ask about being paid. She knew what her protector would say. She could offer to fill in at Zaba Valeur & Co. for the saleswoman who said she needed to join her fiancé in Montreal. Or she could go see Salimata, the Senegalese woman who’d said that La Vache-à-Bière, a microbrewery on the Grand-Place where she knew the boss, was looking for waitresses. The young Flemish woman who led her team walked with her to the tram stop. Since it was lunchtime, they had a bite to eat.

She was really nice. Her name was Ine. One thing led to another and they started trading secrets. Each confessed they found the other’s accent charming. They laughed about that. On they went. Ine talked about her family—her father the computer scientist, her mother an interior decorator who could have been a model, except for an accident that dislocated her hip when she was fifteen. About her boyfriend whose mother had given birth to her youngest in a plane over the Mediterranean in April 1994. They were being evacuated then from Kigali, along with the families of other former dignitaries of the regime defeated by the Tutsi rebels of the Rwandan Patriotic Front.

Nyota talked about her life in Africa. The young woman, who studied hotel management and tourism, gasped when she heard about her royal origins. The Congolese woman then mentioned her hopes of continuing her studies, which had been interrupted by a teachers' strike back home that had gone on for twenty-nine months. A dream that hinged on her petition for refugee status. And then, there was that mission she'd put on hold because she didn't know how to get started. "Finding my father's younger sister. All we know is that she fell for a Belgian who got her to leave her village for the capital. Two years before independence. Then she came to Belgium with another man, who'd hired her as a cleaning woman, or something like that. Still now, more than four decades later, no one knows what happened to her once she arrived in your country. No one in my family ever crossed paths with her old boyfriend or her boss. We have a lot of questions but no answers. In any event, we do know the former employer has left this world. As for her old boyfriend, he could have been one of those old leches who insulted me back there—I'd never even recognize him."

The birth of a friendship.

One evening, as they were walking down avenue de la Toison d'Or on their way to the movies, Ine said, out of the blue, "I mentioned you to a buddy whose godfather just bought two hotels in Wallonia, at least that's what I thought until yesterday. Just a short-term job till you found something better. My friend discouraged me right away. He explained that they're not really hotels but brothels the guy passes off as 'massage parlors.' He said, 'Listen, Ine, I don't think that's a good place for your girlfriend. We're talking about high-end bordellos where the big guys around here are regulars—at least that's what my godfather brags about each year at Christmas dinner.' He asked if I'd heard about Sommiers et Chandelles in Tournai, a place that became famous after a former French minister celebrated—really celebrated, in the company of ten young virgins from Yugoslavia—the end of the ten years of probation a Parisian judge had

given him for some scandal about trading in official honors. I said I'd seen the name in a paper, maybe *Paris Match*, but the story about the Frenchman didn't ring a bell. 'Like me, she'd rather scrub toilets at the Gare du Nord than set foot in a brothel,' I said—that's where we left things."

Ine Vandermaelen invited her Congolese friend to Vilvoorde, where she introduced her to her family. That evening, conversation swung around to Nyota's aunt. Madame Vandermaelen suggested her daughter ask her uncle; he might have an idea or two. A former civil servant in Brussels, and an amateur genealogist, his office was on rue Charles Hanssens in Sablon, only five tram stops from the Porte de Namur, where Nyota lived with her roommates.

Two weeks later, a seventy-year-old with an aquiline nose, piercing eyes, and a wavering voice greeted his niece and her friend, whom she introduced, with a smile, as an authentic Congolese princess. The older gentleman represented the first real chance in forty-five years to solve the mystery of what had happened to Princess Tshala Nyota Moelo.

First, they needed to find out what had happened to René Comhaire, the district administrator in Kasai between January 1957 and February 1958. Was he still alive and living in Belgium in the winter of 2003? Then they'd track down anyone who might have known Mark De Groof, a businessman and collector of primitive art, who lived in Léopoldville between 1954 and his death in 1960.

The Flemish genealogist was very intrigued by this mysterious Congolese woman who reportedly arrived in Belgium the year of the World's Fair in Brussels, snuck into the country by some adventurer known as "the king of masks." He promised to make it his top priority in the coming weeks, and at no charge. "I'll happily accept a bottle of that Tembo beer of yours the day you welcome me into the court of the Bakuba king," he added.

o trace of René Comhaire in Belgium. No known address. His parents, André and Astride Comhaire, had died in Dinant, near Namur, about ten years before, just two years apart. A certain Serge Comhaire, a notary in Mons, was a dead end—no relation despite the name. Xavier Comhaire, another Belgian, working as a train conductor in Rouen, France, hadn't replied. Anne-Sophie Fontenoy, a first cousin who'd been living for the past sixteen years in Reykjavík, Iceland, reported that her cousin had gone to live somewhere in Africa, maybe in Rwanda or Burundi, she wasn't sure; she'd heard about it from a childhood friend of his back in the late 1980s. She'd cut off contact with her family in Belgium after one of her relatives had been charged in a sordid affair that had been on the front page of papers all across the country.

On the other hand, there was no doubt about what happened to Mark De Groof. He'd confirmed everything three different ways. According to Ine's very kind uncle, a woman named Hilde De Groof, residing at 56 Sint Jorisstraat, in the little Flemish town of Aalst, was the only sister of the man said to have employed Princess Tshala in Léopoldville.

After Nyota introduced herself on the phone as a niece of a former employee of her deceased brother, the seventy-three-year-old agreed to meet. Nyota headed to her home, a modest fourth-floor apartment, smelling of fried food and cat litter, with no fewer than twelve tomcats who never stopped meowing during the two hours she spent there.

A very strange meeting, indeed. The young Congolese woman left almost as confused as when she'd gotten off the train from Brussels and headed down Zwarte Zustersstraat. Mark De Groof's sister had welcomed her as if she were a life buoy thrown by time itself to wrest her from a seclusion of more than forty years. The life of a hermit, coupled with a vow of silence imposed by her family and friends, it seemed; Hilde De Groof, starved for conversation, released a flood of words as soon as she saw Nyota, barely letting her get one in edgewise.

Once she'd greeted her on the building's newly carpeted spiral staircase, the old woman with weathered skin and a voice that swung between low- and high-pitched, along with her mood, had turned back the clock. She didn't stop for a second, not even to suggest that her companions in solitude take their meowing elsewhere, without actually serving the glass of apple juice promised when she'd shown her guest to a seat in the kitchen. In that little room, Nyota stared as the lady of the house attacked her porcelain, polishing away with a surprising energy, given her apparent frailty, as focused on her task as the most devoted of farriers. Cleaning here, straightening up there, like an automaton whose gestures had been set to the second since the world began—all while chattering nonstop.

For what really mattered most to Hilde De Groof, what she had to get off her chest, now that someone was listening, was her undying love of the Belgian Congo. History had torn the country away from her, but it had set the tempo of her heart since she'd first set foot there in 1955. "I was just twenty-five years old, my dear girl, let me tell you. Being young and beautiful in the Belgian Congo, that was something, believe me. Looking at you just now, so young, so beautiful, I can see myself in Léo. What a town, Léo! What a magnificent town, I tell you! Oh no, really, the Belgians are too stupid. They never should've lost Congo, never done that to you. Leaving the Congolese like that, abandoning them to their sad fate, just throwing that big, beautiful country in their face, without teaching them even the ABC's of how to run a government. Oh, it was cruel and frankly irresponsible—I'm just telling you what I think. We should hunt them all down, throw 'em up against a wall, and then shoot them, one by one, like the Nazis did. Do you think it's for lack of inspiration that I named each of my adorable pets after a town in the Belgian Congo? Take that one, for example, the big one who's making eyes at you, that's Léo. Léopoldville, my dear girl! Just saying that name brings tears to my eyes, do you see? Tears for my lost chance at happiness. I see it all right before my eyes, the most beautiful season of my life—a life reduced to ruins when I had to flee our beautiful Congo, leaving the dreams of my youth behind.

“I’m talking about dreams, but mainly the most beautiful of all, the one I left there to die, my dear girl. I’m talking about the dream of love, of love that withered on the vine, the love of that young man who made my heart pound like no one else ever did. Ask me why I never married. Oh, he was handsome, handsome like a god! How beautiful his skin, his black skin, so beautiful, intoxicating, thrilling! And he danced so well. You should’ve seen him, my little Negro god. You’re his daughter, am I right? The daughter of Mark’s employee, right? Wait...you said niece on the phone, yes? The niece of a woman he employed? A woman, is that what you said? Well, that changes everything. Because if you were the daughter of Félix Akwesa, then you’d be the daughter he had with a Congolese woman after I’d gone back to Belgium. And who could I blame for your arrival in this world but myself? If you were Akwesa’s daughter, but not a mulatto; if you didn’t carry my blood and his, then I’d only have myself to blame, my dear girl. I could see in his eyes—him, your aunt’s colleague—that he was mad about me! When a woman holds the same place in a man’s eyes as the sun in a cloudless sky—well, she knows. Of course, she knows. He devoured me with his eyes, Akwesa did, but he was afraid of getting burned. He was so afraid of those damned laws we’d imposed down there. Félix Akwesa thought our love was damned from the start. I say that, but don’t believe for a minute, my dear girl, that I hid my feelings all that time I stayed with my brother: three months in all, between February and April 1955. Oh, you won’t believe me, but this Hilde here was anything but timid! Don’t be fooled by the old skin and bones time left me to replace a silhouette that turned heads in Léo whenever I walked into the Show Boat or the Kongo Bar. Red-hot blood ran in my veins, I can tell you that. If even one of the little colonizers who played at being sheriff there among the poor natives had attracted me in the slightest, it would have been a different story, right? But whatever they say, no woman is the master of her heart, isn’t that so? You’re old enough, you know what I mean by lovesick.

“My heart beat only for the Negroes and for one in particular, one whose features, when I think about it, are quite similar to those of the forward on the team from Anderlecht—I forget his name, but you know

who I mean, that force of nature who gives a funny dance each time he scores, the one who marked three goals all by himself against Mouscron last Saturday in Roi Baudouin Stadium. But that man, I mean Akwesa, was beyond shy, my dear girl. But how could I hold that against him in that beautiful, fiery country, where race was the gunpowder that could carry it all away in a flash, just like that, without warning? Then, one day, when I just couldn't bear the sight of his beautiful body, knowing I couldn't touch it, when my brother was out with his friends, I asked Félix Akwesa to play a little rumba so we could shake a leg in the dining room, glued to each other like Negroes and Negresses all over town. He was scared out of his mind but did as he was told. As the voluptuous melody unfolded, I glued myself to him like a leech; I'd had three good shots of hooch and, oh, was I a cocktease! I can still see us swaying languorously to the rhythm of those songs played by the group led by his younger brother, a guy named Wendo...Wendo Kolosoy. We danced to 'Marie-Louise,' the hit of the day, as if there was nothing else in the world but us—no race, no religion, no master, no God, and no hell but the paradise of the unbelievers. Did I confess that I was anything but a nun, yes? I put my hand between his legs and the poor guy, who had a stutter that made his life hell, says, 'Madame Hilde, it's da-da-dangerous what you're doing there. I'm...I'm...' And I, I was seeing stars, so I asked, 'You can't be serious, Akwesa? Are you coming already?' He panics, breaks out in a sweat, 'No, no, Ma-Ma-Madame Hilde, I'm playing with fire, here!' You should've seen my face, my dear girl, you should've seen me. At the end of the song, after what I'd put him through, the poor guy wasn't seeing straight. He mumbled, 'The boss won't be h-h—' I tried to reassure him as best I could. 'He won't be wearing horns, I'm his sister, not his wife, Akwesa!' Then we both burst out laughing, because he was trying to say 'happy.' Why didn't I think of that, huh? I fell into his arms, the time of modesty was far behind us, but there was nothing to be done about it. My big handsome Negro was so afraid, so inhibited, that he just couldn't do it—you can't even imagine, my dear girl. A dead guy could've made a woman regret her brazenness, made her give up her last breath with a good poke with a skewer, but not that living

breathing stone that kept begging me to stop playing with fire, kept crying in Lingala, '*Okobomisa ngai! Okobomisa ngai!*'^[9]

"A few weeks later, when my brother went to play tennis, I cornered Akwesa as he came out of the toilets. With no warning, I pushed him up against the wall, and said straight out, 'It's tonight or never, handsome. I'm leaving for Belgium in two days, you're not going to leave me like this.' And doesn't he just crumple up again, retreat back into his shell, but not before laying out an argument that finally demolishes my last illusions. 'I can't, Madame Hilde, I can't. I just ma-ma—' he struggled to get the words out. 'You just masturbated in the toilets? This is crazy! When I keep telling you that you're the only man in town who makes me feel like a woman?' And there your aunt's colleague struck the final blow. 'No, Madame Hi-Hi-Hilde, I did not ma-ma-masturbate, I got married last Sunday in Saint-Alphonse church.'"

After a monologue that went on for two hours, the matron complained that she had an awful headache. Declared that for the past two years she'd been getting painful headaches every third day at the same time in the afternoon. She added that their long and lovely conversation really hadn't helped calm her nerves. "I'm not usually so loquacious, not at all, I assure you. You have a gift for untying tongues, that must be it, right? You don't hold it against me that I used the word *Negro*, I hope? I am incorrigible—you're supposed to say *Black* these days, right?"

Then she tripped over herself trying to make excuses: She needed to take the pills her doctor had prescribed, and take a short nap, then everything would be all right. She covered her Congolese guest with kisses, with help from Léo and two of the other cats who'd been clambering over her knees all throughout the sermon. "Come back next Saturday, my dear girl, maybe I'll think of something for you. My brother said something about a Negress who'd accompanied him on his last trip, two years before his tragic death. After you called, all I could remember was that he'd entrusted her to the care of the Soeurs de la charité in Namur. This morning I looked through the documents Mark left at our parents' after that trip, but I didn't find anything interesting, other than a strange letter, signed by a

Belgian with the even stranger name of Kunyaza. A love letter like people wrote back then, addressed to a woman the man was crazy about. He even promised he'd pay whatever it took to join her in Léo and stare once more into her eyes of a doe from the tropical savanna. That's what that poor lovesick colonizer wrote, sometime in 1957 or '58—some poor devil my brother must have known, I guess.

“Now I must let you leave. The one thing you should remember, my dear girl, is that the Soeurs de la charité could be very helpful to you—that is, I mean, if my brother really did entrust the woman to them. Come back next Saturday, I'll contact them before then, a simple phone call is all it'll take. Take the train at 9:22 from Brussels Midi station, track 7. That way we'll have all day to talk about this and that. I still haven't told you anything about my wonderful season in Congo; I must tell you about the time my brother took me with him on the river. Five days, all the way to Stanley Falls, where the Wagenya live. Such a wonder of nature, Stanley Falls, let me tell you. And what people, the Wagenya! Oh wait, while I'm at it, if you still have two little minutes. One last confession for the road. It was there on the river, just before we reached Stanley Falls, pampered by two native sailors on the *Iris de la Meuse*, a little jewel chartered by a good friend of Mark's, that I touched, for the one and only time in my life, the sex of a man worthy of the name. Were it not for my modesty...”

Ine Vandermaelen's uncle insisted on seeing his role as good Samaritan through to the end. Since there was nothing more to get from Hilde De Groof, the retired civil servant contacted the Soeurs de la charité. In their archives from the period in question, no mention of Tshala Nyota Moelo. The Mother Superior suggested they contact the Soeurs de Sainte-Marie de Namur, who sent them in turn to the archdiocese of Malines-Brussels.

After a month, nothing but dead ends.

Nyota thanked her Flemish friends. It was time to turn the page. Even if her father held the Belgians up as the champions of the archives, his

premonition about the nefarious power of time proved frustratingly accurate.

EXPO 58
FOUR WEEKS AFTER
THE OFFICIAL
OPENING

Lights flashing, tires screeching, the ambulance pulled to a stop in front of the African pavilion. The doctor stepped out and quickly headed over to the official in charge of first aid post 5, easy to spot with his official badge in the colors of Expo 58. After shaking hands, the two men, trailed by the three urgent-care specialists from Brugmann Hospital, went over to where medics were giving first aid to the wounded woman.

The young African woman, nineteen years old, was laid out on a stretcher on the ground, her eyes closed, head lightly tilted toward her left shoulder. Her face looked calm, but the men leaning over her noted she was having trouble breathing.

A few meters away, four police officers were struggling to pin her aggressor to the ground—he wasn't making it easy for them. He was a Black man, small of stature, wearing rags, and he was fighting for all he was worth to loosen their grip on him, thrashing his head left and right. He kept trying to get up on his knees, but no luck. Each time the men in uniform would grab his ankles and send him crashing back down on his belly.

With a wave of his hand, the doctor asked the medics to step back. He knelt down and grasped the African woman's wrist to check her pulse. Then he shot a glance at Subcommissioner Robert Dumont, who'd just made his way through the crowd—a glance the banker interpreted as a sign of cautious optimism. With an experienced hand, the doctor gently lifted each eyelid. The patient groaned and then loudly exhaled. The beige sheet covering her puffed up slightly below her waist and then settled again, outlining her legs. The subcommissioner's eyes fixed on the large red stain spreading out between her thighs.

"Get her in the ambulance!" The doctor's calm voice made the medics, who'd been standing around waiting for an order, jump into action.

"I'm coming with you, doctor," the subcommissioner snapped, as he handed his attaché case to the secretary who'd brought him a pile of

documents to sign.

“The baron is waiting for you, Monsieur Dumont. You can’t leave the site before your meeting with the minister.”

“You’ll tell the commissioner-general that I will not be attending any meetings until I am certain this young woman is out of danger.”

“And what about Mademoiselle Romy Schneider? You promised her and her friend a private tour of the Atomium at—”

“Tonight at ten thirty, after closing time. I should be back by then, or ‘the Empress’ and her director will have to wait until tomorrow evening. The monument is not likely to fall down before then.”

—

Ten o’clock.

Robert Dumont decided to put off the tour he’d promised the Austrian filmmaker Ernst Marischka and the star of *Sissi: The Young Empress*, the very popular film he’d seen three times in two years. The esteemed guests were informed. He opted not to return home to Laeken where his wife, Geneviève, then six months pregnant, was waiting for him with their two-year-old daughter, Bénédicte.

After quickly wolfing down a sandwich in the hospital cafeteria, he ordered a cup of tea and dove into the twenty-page report from an auditing firm. After five minutes, he realized he couldn’t focus on anything besides the matter at hand. He called and apologized to “the two women in his life,” as he referred to them.

His little daughter had been in bed for an hour already. He was relieved when Geneviève said that given the situation, and regardless of whether she was Black or whether he knew anything about her really, his role on the committee meant he needed to be there “at the bedside of that girl who had no reason to be in that park.” Shifting topics, his wife shared news that warmed his heart. That afternoon she’d gotten a call from the doctor in charge of the gynecology-obstetrics department: Everything was coming along just fine; the pregnancy was perfectly normal.

The banker slept fitfully, his rest interrupted by a nightmare he would long remember. An unfamiliar land. Maybe Congo. Doesn't matter—he'd never traveled anywhere in the tropics. Bound hand and foot, sitting on the ground, surrounded by a crowd of natives dancing to the sound of a drum. A war song rose up from the row of men. Vibrant. Deafening. A horde of women, dressed in rags, bare-breasted, moving slowly, answered their cry with a mourning song. Haunting. Painfully heart-wrenching. In a language that could have been from far-off Papua New Guinea, unless it was the patois of some unconquered tribe in the land of the caribou.

A man swathed in leopard skin appeared, splitting the crowd in two with the spear clenched in his fist. Balancing on just one leg, the stump of the other hanging limply like a punching bag, the determined stranger came straight up to the white prisoner. Staring down at him, the huge ebony monster planted the sharp point of his spear on his chest, between two ribs. He heard him bellow words that rattled his mind and what remained of his courage and dignity: "*Nanzali na etinda po na yo!*"^[10]

Two fifty-five a.m.

He woke up drenched in sweat, his heart racing, pounding; he couldn't sleep for the rest of the night.

The day's turbulent events played out in his mind in an endless loop. The bungling, no, the utter failure of the press conference that morning, when neither he nor Baron Guido Martens De Neuberg could explain why they were going ahead with the "Congolese village" despite mounting complaints. All that the commissioner-general of Expo 58 had managed to do was to pitch a fit when a French television reporter asked a question that really got under his skin, because it irritated a scar that was fifty years old and still just as painful. His Achilles' heel. The secret wound on which, year after year, he placed so many bandages: diplomas, medals, posts, each more prestigious than the last.

Some voices in the national press had echoed the Parisian reporter, wondering if the amazing Expo 58 wasn't for him—a man with an exceptional career, who'd had everything handed to him on a platter and still never paused in his quest for the Holy Grail, always just out of reach, a

final chance to triumph over the abandoned child he'd been. That unmistakable allusion to the frail kid who'd grown up in the posh neighborhood of Hasselt, in Limburg, and among the elite of Liège, with a silver spoon in his mouth, but also a wounded heart and soul: It cut too close. A crack that spread through his body, aching for recognition, all because his father, a magnate of the coal industry, had abandoned him when he was but a child, after his mother was diagnosed with a malignant tumor.

They'd violated his most secret garden—the one he jealously guarded against any and all curious eyes. Except for his friend Robert, there was not one soul—not even his wife or his two daughters—who could've imagined the effort it took for this Sisyphus of the Belgian nobility to don day after day the skin of a satisfied man. He wasn't going to air his dirty laundry just to indulge some scribbler when what he was accused of was really nothing in the context of a project as daunting as a World's Fair.

Cut to the quick, the commissioner-general lost his cool. Rejecting the calm demeanor required by popular wisdom—"sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me"—he lashed out. He went right up to the Frenchman, stared him down, and then, with that booming voice he wielded like an ax whenever anger boiled up, let everyone know that Baron Guido Martens De Neuberg had nothing but contempt for foolhardy runts of that ilk.

Then there was a private conversation with the grand marshal of the royal court. A smooth-talking troublemaker, with a sense of humor he alone deemed irresistible; the power behind the throne who thought the way to get the best out of a committee he dismissed as gutless was to describe its members as "feckless cabin boys shipwrecked on the shores of Absurdistan." For the man who for five years had sacrificed everything to bring King Baudouin's dream to life, that was one insult too many. Guido Martens De Neuberg threatened to tender his resignation. He'd have slammed the door on his way out of that meeting with Prince Albert, heir to the throne, if Robert hadn't employed all diplomatic means at his disposal to salvage the situation. The subcommissioner suggested his friend take a day off. He hinted about health concerns. That was the end of week six.

Yet their work had gotten off to a fine start; the king and prime minister were thrilled. A great fan of football, the commissioner-general had popped the cork on more than one bottle of champagne in his headquarters in Belvédère the day after the Spanish team, Real Madrid CF, defeated the Italians of AC Milan by three to two in the finals of the European Champion Clubs' Cup. The match had been played in the stadium in Heysel.

Week after week, crowds from as far away as New Zealand and Rhodesia gathered at the base of the Atomium. On Sunday, April 20, three days after the opening ceremony, there were no fewer than 713,664 visitors, even though at thirty francs, the tickets were not cheap. No matter, the slogan of Expo 58 worked like a charm: "A world for a better life for mankind." The whole world, it seemed, was jubilant. Men and women of all backgrounds rubbed shoulders. Brussels proved it could be done. With an unspoken agreement between Dwight Eisenhower and Nikita Khrushchev, the Cold War had politely retreated, leaving the door open for peaceful coexistence. A truce that allowed the two rival powers to put on a show of friendly goodwill in their neighboring pavilions, under the discreet, watchful eyes of the hundreds of spies swarming about, without provoking a global sneeze like the one during the Korean War, which had resulted in a delay of the event originally scheduled for April 1955.

Even the French press, usually reluctant to offer a laurel wreath to their neighbors from the other side of the Quiévrain, praised the Belgian organizers—"such an improvement on 1935," as the special reporter for *Le Figaro* put it. In West Germany, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* said much the same thing, while the *New York Times* printed a slew of reports peppered with accounts from Americans in Brussels.

Then, without warning, a dark cloud began to form over Heysel. In one of the busiest pavilions, where visitors could stare in wonder at "a Congolese village filled with Bantus and their Pygmy guest—a scene straight from the equatorial jungle"; where they could see for themselves

“how far these natives had come, thanks to Belgium, from the dark shadows of the Kurtz era to the present day,” and understand “why our Christian civilizing mission in Central Africa will remain one of the greatest achievements, first and foremost, of the Builder King Léopold II, then of our united people, and of the whole world”—the project so dear to the minister of the colonies had been dealt a fatal blow.

As he teetered on the edge of consciousness, once again under Morpheus’s sway, Robert Dumont saw the scenes in fast-forward, faces all a-blur. Voices echoed in his head—the curses and boos, the chorus of sighs.

Then came the signs—DÉFENSE DE NOURRIR LES NOIRS, VERBODEN NEGRS TE VOEDEN, DO NOT FEED THE NIGGERS—posted all over the concrete-block walls. The subcommissioner had them taken down without informing his superior. No one was the wiser. Same thing—no waves after the first shows, when the self-named leader of the eleven Congolese, a guy named Zando Bara, a dizzyingly talented dancer, acrobat, and contortionist, gave an ultimatum. Just like that the Pygmy, a member of the Twa ethnic group, threatened to stop performing the feats for which he’d been recruited, after a Catholic missionary had discovered him near Coquilhatville. His last-minute demand caught the organizing committee off guard. The self-taught artist would stay silent and immobile until Queen Fabiola herself came to shake his hand and personally ask him to amaze the visitors with the talents that had made him the most famous Pygmy in the district of Bikoro, in the northwest of the Belgian Congo.

It had taken all of the wit and wisdom of the man running the pavilion to find a solution. The civil servant came up with a strategy that had the star from the shores of the Congo River completely hoodwinked, even though he was clearly an intelligent man. They brought in one of the hostesses of the World’s Fair, a charming lady in her mid-thirties, blond hair, a Colgate smile, wearing high heels that made her look, at least in the eyes of a Pygmy from the equatorial forest, like a Belgian queen. The one-man strike asked the true-false queen to stand beside him in front of the cameras. That picture of “the man from the spectacle in Heysel” was all over the front page of the papers: as proud as a king, with a sparkling smile that showed

off his teeth filed into sharp points, according to the aesthetic traditions of his forest tribe. There was a marked influx of tourists to the village the very next day.

That memory triggered another in Robert Dumont's foggy mind. He'd gone to the Russian pavilion four days after the opening and met an old friend from the air force who'd come to contemplate the greatest of all the attractions on the fairgrounds: the life-size model of Sputnik I, the first rocket ever launched into space on October 4, 1957. The friend, who'd shared a cell with Commissioner-General De Neuberg in the Wehrmacht's prison, congratulated Dumont on the success of the event for which he and their mutual friend were the public faces. They reminisced about the beautiful times they'd shared at Saint-Luc secondary school and at the University of Liège; how different their professional careers had been; how time was eating away, little by little, the spirit of their youth. They continued chatting while they walked through the park, until the old airman asked, "Was it really a good idea to bring those Negroes to the World's Fair? We know how it all got started, but, my dear Robert, no one, not even the king, knows what the final act of this bad circus will be." He spoke from experience: Just one visit to the Congolese village with his family and the devil himself had destroyed the peace of his marriage.

During the visit, the officer explained, his wife seemed so fascinated by the half-naked body of one of the villagers that he'd convinced her to put her hand through the bars. For the price of a couple of coins offered discreetly to the dancer, who was smiling from ear to ear, the husband encouraged his wife to not be so shy. To run her fingers over the impressive muscles of the young Negro who'd captivated them with his dance steps and the way he shimmied his hips. "This is your lucky day, Sophie, the savages won't be here all year. Go on, make yourself happy." Then her thoughtful husband stepped away, leaving the timid Sophie to indulge her barely concealed curiosity, and to chat happily for a bit with the savage with the massive pectorals and the ineffable smile.

The couple had come back the very next day.

Sophie had gotten over her shyness.

Then the unthinkable had occurred—something beyond his worst nightmares: While they were enjoying an intimate moment back in Waterloo, after a dinner where much wine had flowed, the officer almost had a heart attack. Speaking far more frankly than Robert ever could have imagined, the former prisoner of war confessed his misfortune—the moment of desolation when ecstasy became a slap in the face. At the height of their passion, his dear and tender wife, who was usually as silent as a dead fish, scratched him and even drew blood, while moaning a name he’d never heard before: “Lokito!”

She was urging Lokito on—“Harder!”—gasping and singing Lokito’s praises—“No man has ever turned me on like this.”

Since the officer’s name was Laurent Goossens, he had no trouble figuring just who this Lokito the Lion King was. That’s a name more far more common in northern Belgian Congo than in the north of Belgium. The subcommissioner had no idea what to say when his friend asked his advice about how to resolve this crisis that was threatening to destroy the couple who had invited Dumont and his wife, Geneviève, no more than a year before, to their thirteenth wedding anniversary.

Then came the incident that lit the fuse on the powder keg.

During a school visit, some adolescents from a classical high school in Flemish Brabant tossed bananas over the fence around the village, shouting, “*Eet de bananen, kleine negertjes, anders zullen we de handen afsnijden!*”^[11] They even translated their taunt into French. In the ensuing chaos, some visitors started to whoop like monkeys, dancing about in ways that left little to the imagination. The villagers took these actions as a declaration of war and protested vociferously. The show was interrupted. The little colony huddled around one of the two women in the group: Tshala Nyota Moelo.

—

Tshala Moelo had already given a hard time to those in charge of the pavilion by refusing to dance with the others to traditional rhythms from the Teke ethnic group. Unwilling to bend to pressure or threats, she

persisted in singing in French. She said she wanted to play along with the scenario that justified her presence there on the fairgrounds, but only if they let her sing the melodies she'd learned at Sainte-Marie-de-la-Miséricorde in her native Kasai. She kept humming the round "*Le monde ancien s'en est allé*"—"The old world has passed away"—her arms held out like on a cross, in a sort of ecstatic trance that she emerged from only to cackle hilariously. A burst of laughter that was all the more disconcerting because she'd immediately fall into a state of sullen apathy, seemingly unaware of the activity around her. Other than the song "Marie-Louise," which was played at the end of each show and during which she danced a most graceful rumba, the melodies that came out of her mouth were all sung in the language she'd learned from the nuns. She'd even been heard intoning the *Salve Regina*, one of the five Catholic antiphonaries dedicated to the Virgin Mary, which she sang in the version set down by Dominicans in the middle of the thirteenth century:

*Salve Regina, Mater misericordiae
Vita, dulcedo, et spes nostra, salve
Ad te clamamus, exsulses filii Evae.*

With this foray into the esotericism of the *lingua Latina*, the willful Tshala was refusing to abide by the rules, refusing to behave like a good little Negress from the dark heart of the equatorial forest, a Bantu from the same region as Zando Bara the Pygmy.

In the end, Subcommissioner Robert Dumont had to get involved. Since the idea was to shine a light on all the good the empire had done by bringing civilization to the natives—their progress from the time of Henry Morton Stanley's explorations to the creation of political parties, some of which had sent representatives to Brussels for the World's Fair—then Tshala was doing the right thing at the right place and time. She'd represent the Black woman who'd shed the shadowy animistic soul passed down to her over the centuries and been born again, baptized into the Holy Spirit, a rite brought to the African flock by the benevolence of the universal

Catholic Church. This small step for Christian Belgium was a giant leap for animist Congo, Dumont argued, and was illustrated by the young woman's knitting as well. For that was what the Congolese woman usually did while the other "villagers" drew in the crowds by pounding on their drums or improvising a *libanda* duel, that famous style of wrestling practiced by the Bangala in northern Congo.

That morning, the group gathered around Tshala—which included everyone but Zando Bara the Pygmy—decided to stop performing the shows that had made theirs the most popular of the seven African pavilions. "You never told us we'd be treated like that. *Like that!* No, it's not acceptable, monsieur, are we clear? We won't stay here even one more day. We demand to be paid for the past six weeks and sent back to our families." That was the message Tshala, the group's unofficial spokesperson, delivered first to the man in charge of the pavilion for the Belgian Congo and Rwanda-Urundi, and then to the subcommissioner, who'd hurried over to see what was going on.

In truth, the incident blamed on students from Flanders was just the last straw.

Tensions had been rising for several days, flames fanned by a coalition that, while nothing like an invincible armada, still managed to make their voices heard far beyond the boundaries of the Osseghem woods and Laeken Park. All the little leftist groups in the kingdom—those to the left of the left—had come together under the vague banner of the Front for an Anti-Colonialist Expo. There were those who remembered fondly the Congress against Colonial Oppression and Imperialism of 1927: communist activists still stunned by their crushing defeat in the last legislative elections; dyed-in-the-wool anarchists, always ready to rumble with the forces of order serving a state they openly qualified as "a little farce in three languages, with no people"; and, of course, anti-monarchists whose occasional theatrics were a poor cover for their lack of popular support in a country

well of aware of all it owed to Léopold of Saxe-Coburg-Saalfeld, the widower of Princess Charlotte Augusta of Wales, who in 1831 accepted the crown and became the Belgian king. Rounding out this fine group were a few mavericks from the Liberal Party that was openly flirting with the Congolese nationalists led by a certain Lumumba.

As if this strange mix wasn't striking enough, the Association of Congolese Students in Belgium decided to join them. A small group, no more than about fifty members, but on April 17, the official opening day of the "big fair of the little people," they'd sent a letter to King Baudouin. The signatories demanded, "respectfully, the closure of the so-called Congolese village, a decision that would honor Your Majesty as well as Belgium. A decision that would contribute to maintaining the concord between the motherland and Congo, the land of our ancestors, at this moment when people across Africa, following the example of our brothers and sisters in Ghana, are ready to assume their rightful place in the great concert of nations."

A letter that did not receive a response.

Tshala spoke on behalf of her companions. She informed the organizers of their decision to leave the fairgrounds in Heysel.

Before Robert Dumont could respond to the complaints the African woman raised, Zando Bara the Pygmy rushed out of the corner where he'd been stoically watching the scene, plotting a counterattack, looking for the weak link in the case made by the woman who'd been annoying him since the first day. "So beautiful it hurts the eyes, I'll admit, but so what? Did Nzakomba^[12] give her one toe more than my mother? Is she so beautiful she doesn't shit like every other woman I see traipsing around? I've heard that when she was born her father proclaimed it was her destiny to be a man. Well, there she goes trying to prove what she has under the raffia pagne the whites gave her. *Siata pata!*"^[13] he snapped when a friend pointed out the new recruit's combination of blinding beauty and strength of character.

Zando Bara let the subcommissioner know that the words coming out of the young woman's mouth did not represent him in any way. "This is the

biggest farce yet on this trip where I've heard too much already! If the Belgians don't let any of their women wear the pants here in this park, where dozens of men bark out orders and are obeyed right away, then why do you think, bwana Dumont, that here in this enclosure you've baptized the 'Congolese village,' we Black men will let some woman have the last word? Please help me understand, for you are the master."

Pointing a finger at the students he'd aligned with at the very start of the exposition, he added that four of them intended to honor their word and "see through to the end this beautiful adventure that, as you have all witnessed, has brought me accolades from whites of all ages; that allowed me to have my picture taken next to the Queen of Belgium, me Zando Bara, the Botswa^[14] mocked by all those fools back in Congo, those worthless nothings so eager to drop their drawers for the White Man, even though they cover me with insults and treat me like garbage each time I leave my village of Bosawa to buy sugar from the Portuguese merchant in Coquilhatville. Because down there, bwana Dumont, you know, people who look like that girl from Léopoldville and who play at being rebels here, have no respect at all for any Botswa. It doesn't matter if you've learned to read and write as I have; they treat us as if we came into this world missing a leg, while it's just a question of appearance, of size, and that's meaningless once a man grows important by using his intelligence. Just watch as a big strapping Bantu almost kills himself by slapping as hard as he can at a mosquito that's landed on his testicles—then you'll understand right away that the Bantus would make their lives easier if somebody just let them know they could use the brain Nzakomba put between their ears. Only fools fail to see the infinite grandeur that hides in what is infinitely small. As long as the Bantus pride themselves on their physical prowess and disdain their big brothers the Pygmies, we Batswa will be the mosquitoes on their testicles. We'll show them that we were here on earth when they were still nothing more than garbage in the belly of the universe. And each time they hit us, they'll cry out in pain; each time they step on us, they'll pay, because if we are, as they believe, shit on feet, well, what'll happen to

them is what always happens to whoever steps in shit: He limps—even if shit, as we all know, doesn't have any thorns.

“So this morning, I, Zando Bara, say loud and clear to all the whites here that the girl from Léopoldville who plays at being a rebel doesn't speak for me or for my three Bantu friends there, who, as they've shown me in all our long conversations, see the world with Botswana eyes. So she and her followers who treat her like a princess can go look for me among the chimpanzees. I, Zando Bara, and my faithful companions will stay here in the village. And even if it's not a real village, we don't give a damn; the people who flock here each day know this is just a show of smoke and mirrors. They're still happy to visit to a handful of Negroes put in this pen to show off a difference anyone can see: eleven Negroes with hair different from their neighbors', with skin burned by the sun—that's enough to excite those who parade by here all day. So they come to get their eyeful, to admire the greatest contortionist anywhere in the Belgian Congo and Rwanda-Urundi, a man who knows his job. And when the sun sets, everyone goes home, happy and at peace with themselves.

“There are worse things in life. Even now, as we speak, back in my home forest, a hunter is being torn to pieces by a wild beast that's trying to protect its young, and that's not Belgium's fault. We're not going to spoil the party just because a few bananas were thrown by a crowd of kids who must be driving their own parents crazy, bananas that didn't kill or even hurt anyone. There were some insults, so what? If a human being could be killed by insults, then, as the girl from Léopoldville who claims to be a princess knows full well, there'd be no more Botswana left in the forests of Bikoro; and everywhere else in Congo, as we speak, the Negroes would've all crossed over from life to death. Whips and harsh words have long marked the passage of the seasons down there, and it's not Patrice Lumumba who's on his way here to Belgium who'll tell you otherwise. As for the monkey howls, I don't know what to say, because I don't see even one monkey here among us. So if there's some wild animal who thinks he's found his twin in this park and decides to yell out a message of solidarity, well, why should I, Zando Bara, care at all?

“Let’s set the record straight, bwana Dumont. Zando Bara and his faithful companions will stay in the village and bring joy to the Belgians and their guests. And when the party is over and done, like my friend the queen promised me, in front of witnesses, when she came for the picture that appeared in all the newspapers, I’ll go spend the night at the royal palace. Then I’ll return to my home in Bosawa and marry the girl who’s waiting for me. She’s not beautiful—I’m not stupid, marrying a girl who looks like that crazy Tshala would just be an invitation for all the vultures to shit on my head. No, as a self-respecting man, I’ll go right away and ask for the hand of a girl whose true beauty has only been seen by the old sages of my village. ‘Take that one, Zando, maybe she has a big bulging forehead, but what does that matter? Ugliness is always passed on to the children, not to the husband or wife you choose, so you’ll be okay. Take her and you’ll be marrying peace, peace and tranquility for the rest of your days.’ That’s what they told me, man to man. And I won’t be going home empty-handed. No, I’ll bring the girl who’s waiting for me gifts bought with the francs I’ve earned with the sweat of my brow. There, I’ve gotten everything off my chest. Anyone who’s not happy about it can just grab a rifle and shoot me.”

The situation had gone downhill once the group had split into two opposing camps. Three former students who wanted to follow the project through lined up behind the Pygmy, while young Tshala was the clear leader of the seven recruits who were determined to leave the park.

Everyone was shouting, louder and louder; insults flew.

In Lingala, Tshala called Zando Bara “a big fool who, like the mosquito in his own example, convinces himself he’s being applauded when what he’s really hearing is the sound of hands trying to smack him flat.” She railed against *bobole ya ngungi*—in other words, the mosquito’s legendary duplicity—and then added it was “really the height of stupidity to compare what was going on here to the situation between Bantus and Pygmies, since in this pen, we’re all equal. Equal before the laughter of the anonymous

visitor, equal in the eyes of the banana thrower, equal when the soldier tries to prove he's a man by insulting us—that, no, he's not the sort of guy who's impressed by eleven Negroes in a cage. The bananas and the words of those senseless fools should bring us together into a united front, I mean, they should bind us like five fingers on a hand, not revive old squabbles that we were supposed to leave behind when we walked onto these grounds. *Oyo koloa te, eh?*“^[15]

From behind the young woman, one of the partisans of an immediate walkout piled on, declaring that you'd have to be some idiot of a Pygmy not to understand that the village was just a trick their hosts came up with to make them the laughingstock of the world. And if that wasn't the case, “Then where's their village, huh? It's pretty strange that they generously offer this privilege to us, and only to us. The Russians show off their metal biceps, and so do the Americans; the French display their wines; but the Belgians show their natives, a few comic strips, and that's about it. How did the Belgians forget about themselves? And if there's a second village that absolves them, why don't you show it to us, Zando Bara, the king of the jungle who dreams of making the Belgian king a cuckold—my eye! Show it to us, so my friend Lokito and I can go take a nap there, because our backs have been aching for three days. Are you gonna show it to us, you little shit who stinks to high heaven?”

That was clearly too much for Zando Bara's sense of pride. With a sudden and powerful leap, his foot went flying at the heckler. A calculated, radical, and willful act of violence. And punctuated by a curse that rang out above the brouhaha from the increasingly angry crowd on the other side of the barbed-wire fence. “*Kamata ya yo, nyangalakata!*“^[16] The target, however, had lightning reflexes; in a fraction of a second, he jumped out of the way and behind Tshala, who had turned to look at the Pavilion of Fauna and Commerce and the two cable cars full of pilgrims that dangled above. The aggressor's heel landed solidly on the young woman's lower belly, and she let out a piercing wail: “*Nzambe na ngai!*”

She collapsed.

Facedown on the ground.

Along her left leg ran a trickle of blood.

Sensing someone there by the bed, Robert Dumont struggled to open his eyes under the dull glow of neon lights. The doctor's face was puffy, his features drawn, his eyes expressionless.

"Monsieur Dumont, did you know the young Congolese woman was pregnant?"

"Pregnant? How could I have known that? Whatever...She got here about a month ago and no one noticed anything."

"Eleven weeks. Maybe twelve...Something like that."

"Twelve weeks ago, she was in Congo. In Léopoldville."

"Her husband didn't travel to Brussels with her?"

"Listen, Doctor, I don't know very much about this girl. Not whether she has a husband nor if she knew her condition and chose to keep it from us."

"I see. You and your friends made no effort to verify her health. A little strange, given the sort of contract she had signed for Heysel, no?"

"Doctor, all the Congolese that we engaged at Expo 58 had medical examinations the week of April 5. No pregnancy was reported. Not that I know of."

"I don't know who did those medical examinations of yours or where. The patient, Tshala Nyota Moelo, had no records here—"

"Had no...?"

"Don't panic. It's just there was no record of treatment until yesterday evening. She's alive...Basically, the blow she received caused an abruption of the trophoblast—the membrane that develops into the placenta over the course of the pregnancy. A rupture that led to internal bleeding, as you certainly observed when she was brought in by the medics after the accident. We've done all we can to prevent anemia, which could have resulted in hypovolemic shock, which would have ultimately proven fatal to the patient. But to be completely honest..."

“Yes?”

“I need to know whether she has any relatives in our country.”

“That really doesn’t matter, doctor. I assume responsibility for her care.”

“Okay. No known family in Belgium.”

“I mean...I wouldn’t have spent the night in this hospital room if the young woman were for me no more than...”

“Yes?”

“...than a circus animal. Is that what you wanted to hear? Well, then, I’ve said it.”

“A ‘circus animal’ you say? Ah, of course. The ‘African village.’ ”

“You want to know whether I’d put up more of a fight to keep this from happening again?”

“Just calm down, Monsieur Dumont. Come with me, your protégée wants to speak with you. She seemed quite surprised to learn you’d slept here, waiting for her to regain consciousness.”

“Is she alert? Can she speak? Sweet Jesus!”

“About half an hour ago she started talking in her sleep. She said something about an object she needed to give Monsieur Dumont. Something precious you needed to take care of, she repeated.”

“Did she say what it was? Describe the object?”

“She was touching it. It’s the necklace she’s wearing with—”

“With the beautiful ivory figurine, a woman’s bust. I noticed it.”

“She may be able to tell you what she wants you to do with it, but you have to be careful with her. Too much strain could be fatal. I’ve given her sedatives, and she needs to rest. But since she’s insisting, I’m willing to give you ten minutes. Not one more. I’m very sorry.”

—

Rain was pouring down on the capital, just as it had at the same time day before. A young man approached the reception desk at the Hôtel des Colonies, at 6 rue des Croisades, where seven members of the Congolese delegation to Expo 58 were chatting with representatives of the

Liberal Party about the “Heysel scandal.” An employee led him to the room where the meeting was being held; a handful of reporters were waiting in nearby cafés, hoping for a scoop.

Seeing them at the door, the head of the delegation excused himself and joined the two in the hallway. The young visitor pulled a slip of paper from the inside pocket of his pinstriped blazer and tentatively held it out to the man, who towered over him.

“Monsieur Lumumba?”

“Yes, that’s me. To what do I owe the honor, young man?”

“I went to see the ‘Congolese village,’ at the park the day before yesterday with my parents—”

“You mean that abomination your king allowed to be built in the heart of Brussels?”

“I’ve never met the king, monsieur. I’m here to tell you that I spoke with a girl, about my age, maybe nineteen or twenty. A Black girl who’s there in the park and who asked me to bring this to you.”

Patrice Lumumba unfolded the piece of paper on which the address of his office in the Kalina section of Léopoldville had been hastily scribbled. He immediately recognized his own handwriting and then it all came flooding back. The exact circumstances in which he’d given the address of the Bracongo main office to a woman he didn’t know, a young beauty he’d met a few months before in the Léo-Bisengo, the night of the anniversary party for his friend Joseph-Désiré Mobutu. A girl he’d lost track of and that none of his friends at the party had known. Each time he’d been out of the office, the commercial director had asked his secretary if a “certain Tshala, a very pretty little lady, a bit shy, but with a brazen look in her eyes,” hadn’t come to the main entrance. Every time for a month he’d gotten an answer along the lines of “The young lady hasn’t come by, boss; not that I’m aware of, but Madame Pauline, your wife, called to ask if...” Every day till he’d left for the metropole.

“And what was this young Black woman doing in that park when you met her?”

“She was dancing and singing. We’d stopped to listen to her sing in Latin, to admire her voice—it was beautiful, so truly beautiful, you wouldn’t have thought she was Black, if you know what I mean. When my parents were looking at something else, she took the chance to speak with me, just as I’m speaking with you now.”

“She was singing in Latin? What kind of story is that?”

“It’s the truth, monsieur. Behind the barbed wire, she danced and sang while her friends showed the visitors how they and the other members of their tribe live in the jungle. There was even a really small man, a Pygmy in fact, who twisted himself up in all sorts of knots, rolling around a bamboo ring as if his body were made of latex. At one point, a woman paid him to show his privates and, believe it or not, the Pygmy didn’t wait to be asked twice—”

“There’s a Pygmy there showing his genitals to the visitors?”

“Yes, monsieur. The day before yesterday he was charging one franc to show a buttock, one and a half for both. For three francs, he’d drop his pants to his ankles. The girl who sent me didn’t do anything like that. You should’ve seen her dance. My mother said she’d never imagined you could float on air like that while dancing, especially when surrounded by such a raucous crowd. I couldn’t believe my eyes.”

“Wait, wait...Are you telling me that the young woman who gave you this paper has been there in Heysel Park these past weeks, along with the Pygmy you described, as one of the attractions?”

“Precisely. My mother said there was nothing funny about exhibiting people like that. She always speaks her mind, even if every day my father criticizes her for not thinking before she opens her mouth.”

“Your mother is a grand lady, and I have no words to describe the man you call your father. You’ll tell them that, won’t you—that’s a quote from Patrice Lumumba. Okay?”

“I’ll tell my mother, monsieur.”

“Very well. But tell me...Why did this girl who asked you to do her a favor and come see me, why did she trust you, a perfect stranger?”

“I asked her that myself, monsieur. She said it was because I was the first white boy who’d come to see the village who didn’t end up taunting them or just laughing like a fool. My mother said it was her way of tossing a bottle into the ocean.”

“Brave souls know that there will always be a helping hand to pick up a bottle entrusted to the waves that ebb and flow.”

“No doubt. Someone told her you were staying in this hotel. Before a guard came to shoo me away, she insisted I tell you that she was counting on you. I gave her my word, monsieur.”

“I am so very grateful, my friend. Can you tell me your name?”

“Vincent. Vincent De Koninck.”

“Thank you very much, Vincent. The Belgium of tomorrow is lucky that valiant boys like you are in her future. May the god of my ancestors watch over your mother. Please come with me. I want to introduce you to your country’s future prime minister, who’s meeting with us behind this door. Come.”

—

The doctor who was leading the subcommissioner back to the waiting room stared long and hard at the visitor coming in behind a young intern.

“And what precisely is the nature of your relationship to the patient, monsieur?”

“What sort of relationship should a Black man have with a female patient to be deemed worthy in this place, monsieur?”

“I don’t know who you are or where you’re from, and it really doesn’t matter, but one thing is clear: Either you’ll answer my question or I’ll call the guard to throw you out. What is your relationship to the patient you’ve come to see, Monsieur Mulumba?”

“My name is Patrice Lumumba, monsieur. Patrice Émery Lumumba. If that name doesn’t ring a bell, I’m sure your colleague here has heard it at least once this week from the mouth of one of your local reporters.”

“What Monsieur Dumont just heard from the mouth of the woman you’ve come to see—and who is in no state to receive a visitor, were he Pope Pius XII himself—is that she has no relatives, close or distant, here on Belgian soil.”

“You Belgians will never learn! I never claimed to be—”

“Goodbye, Monsieur Malumba!”

“Patrice Émery Lu-mum-ba!”

The doctor slammed the door between them and turned to the subcommissioner.

“Is that the famously neurotic man from Congo?”

“Patrice Lumumba.”

“Do you think...could he be the one responsible for this pregnancy?”

“I have no idea. But even if there’s no family connection, given the situation and in light of what that man represents, I wondered if we shouldn’t have made an exception—”

“The exception, monsieur subcommissioner, I made for you. You saw with your own eyes the patient’s state. She spoke to you when she was able to think clearly. Now, if you want me to be perfectly honest, it’ll be a miracle if she holds on till tomorrow evening.”

“You’re confirming my worst fears.”

“Regretfully so, believe me.”

“I know.”

“My shift is over, and I promised I’d take my boy to the Russian pavilion to see Sputnik I. You can remain here if you’d like, but I suspect your family must be worried about you.”

“My wife knows why I’ve spent the past two days here.”

“All the better. Do you have children, monsieur?”

“A daughter. Geneviève and I are expecting our second. I hope it will be a boy this time. Well...a child is a child, you’ll say. Why do you ask?”

“No reason. Just curiosity. Take good care, Monsieur Dumont.”

- [1.](#) In Lingala and in Kikongo, the term is a catchall for Occidental countries.
- [2.](#) In Congolese rumba, the *atalaku* is a musician who uses their voice to set the rhythm for the dance steps.
- [3.](#) “Uncles,” an ambiguous term used at times by the Congolese for the Belgians.
- [4.](#) “Just tell the truth!”
- [5.](#) “Just spit it out!”
- [6.](#) “Forget it!”
- [7.](#) A Congolese slang term for “Arab” (it’s the name for an ethnic group in the country).
- [8.](#) “My God.”
- [9.](#) “You’re trying to kill me!”
- [10.](#) “I have a mission for you!”
- [11.](#) “Eat the bananas, little Negroes, or we’ll cut off your hands!”
- [12.](#) “God” in the dialect of Lingala spoken in Équateur Province.
- [13.](#) An interjection used in Lingala that can be translated as “Drop it!”
- [14.](#) The noun Pygmies use to identify themselves (it’s the singular of Batswa).
- [15.](#) “Should we think that we’re cursed?”
- [16.](#) “Take that, you jackass!”

PART II

Grandpa, we are here. It's Monday, September 26, 2005. We came from Brussels, that faraway place where since an evening in 1958 your daughter, my Ndoyi, Princess Tshala Nyota Moelo has lain; she whose long absence has cast a dark and oppressive veil over our souls. We got on a plane yesterday evening, unsure we'd find you still alive. On the telephone, Papa told me, "Tell the white man, tell that Professor Dumont the family is waiting for him, that the king is impatient to hear what news he brings."

You'd often confided to my papa that you didn't want to leave without knowing. My sister always repeated that, making fun of you each time I got her on the phone. It was only fair, you'd spent your life teasing us, giving us little nicknames: I was the sparrow, always singing, she the chatterbox who couldn't keep a secret. She told me that since I'd announced I was coming back to Congo with the son of the man to whom our aunt had entrusted her last wishes, you'd gotten out the suit she'd bought you with her first wages as a waitress at Les Boyz Vous Ta-Kin. You got out that beautiful red suit you'd been saving for the "perfect occasion" and told her, "Iron it, iron the suit for me, Zuená. Iron it and put it away, out of reach of the roaches, protected from the dust. I want it ready, because that white man could arrive at any moment, like a thief, you know. The most important encounters never happen like you imagine, never ever—listen to this old timer, Zuená."

Now the white man's here.

He's sitting on my right. He doesn't understand a single word of our language, but that's not really a bad thing, since then I can talk freely to you, without weighing each of my words. His name is Francis Dumont.

He's a professor at the university, and also a lawyer. Born the year of my Ndoyi's death, he just celebrated his forty-seventh birthday. He has one child, a little girl, six months old, a little angel. It's because of her that he made this trip that is so important to you, to us all. And in just a moment you'll understand why.

But before we get to the child, before I begin translating for my friend, when the time has come for him to bare his soul—please understand he is really a friend and not just someone who came along for the ride. So before you listen to him, I need to go back in time. While Papa and Mama have gone off to look for supplies they don't have in the pharmacy here at the Soeurs des Pauvres hospital, I'll go back in time to tell you how our paths crossed. How Francis and I got to know each other back in Belgium, where I'd gone in 2003—you remember, don't you?—in hopes of earning a diploma that would make you proud, you who, after losing the apple of your eye, had to abdicate your throne and seek refuge in this capital of ours that you used to call a den of scavengers.

I remember how much you used to like listening to my stories, whatever stories I had to tell, including my little heartbreaks, those aches I kept from Papa and Mama. You always knew the right thing to say to make me feel better, some anecdote that put things in perspective. You nicknamed me "Voice of Congo." So yes, once the doctor is gone and my friend loses his battle with exhaustion and sleep, I'll live up to my reputation and tell you the whole story about how I met Professor Dumont, every detail from start to finish, as much as my memory allows. Since we were children, you'd told us that our ancestors' spirits always finished openly what they began in secret. So I'll tell you how, one clue after the other, they opened our eyes to my deceased aunt's somber fate, and then brought us to your hospital bedside where doctors are doing their best to ward off bad luck.

Would you believe it—you, the inveterate fan now wearing the jersey of your favorite team, AS Vita Club, who hardly left the house except for a match at Martyrs Stadium—if I told you that it was football, yes, a match of football, that brought the two of us together?

The match I'm talking about wasn't just any old match—even today, a year and a half later, it still makes equal amounts of ink and saliva flow in Belgium and across Europe. A mouthwatering match in the Champions League, between two of Europe's most prestigious clubs—something like a contest between AS Vita and Tout Puissant Mazembe would be at home. It took place in Roi Baudouin Stadium in Heysel—that part of town will come up a lot in my story tonight—between Belgium's most decorated club, RSC Anderlecht, known as the Mauves, and Celtic FC, a team from a place called Glasgow in Scotland, not far from England, in the land of Queen Elizabeth II.

You must be wondering how I had the money to go to such an important match—I'm sure you'd heard I was struggling to survive in Belgium, picking up odd jobs and saving whatever I could from my meager, hard-earned wages to pay for the studies that I'd had to put off for later.

Truth is, there's a love story behind that football match, even if I'm not too keen on that expression—it rings hollow and pretentious. I'll get back to that later; for now, just remember that the invitation I'd gotten to go to Roi Baudouin Stadium had come from Mamie Solution—you know, the “Second Office” of the singer you so sarcastically described as wearing huge potato sacks for pants. Like I told you on the phone, the Maestro's wife, Mamie Solution, who'd gotten me a temporary visa and found me odd jobs, was my guardian angel. She looked out for me, like any businesswoman takes care of her own self-interest, and advised me to avoid the Gabonese, those cheapskates, as well as the Moroccans, who supposedly treat their wives like camels. So when she asked me to fill in at L'Apogée du Manioc, her restaurant in Matonge, Ixelles, because one of the waitresses had been fired the night before, well, she had no idea that the star striker for the Mauves, the team from Anderlecht, Passy Yakembo himself, would show up for dinner.

When that guy—who just might give you great-grandchildren before long, provided he doesn't wake up one morning and realize what a mess I am—stopped by for a bite to eat, everyone panicked, including Mamie Solution. You should've seen her. You're a master storyteller, and I can

imagine you imitating her gestures, her knowing smiles—clearly the lady of the house. When he came in she snapped, “That’s Passy Yakembo, and I’m counting on you girls. You know the rules. Big smile, show off your cleavage, anticipate his every desire, *boyebi kaka*.^[1] I won’t touch your tips tonight, but I want this guy to come back every Saturday and bring the rest of the Mauves with him, from the trainer to the ball boy...” That pretty much sums up Mamie Solution right there. You either loved my guardian angel or despised her—she left no one indifferent.

Still, the most famous Congolese in Belgium was on his best behavior all evening; he made no passes at any of us. So how does he fit into the story of how Francis and I met? Well, we never would have met if the player hadn’t whispered in my ear as he was leaving that he didn’t know if he’d be coming back for the delicious chicken moambe or for the beautiful eyes he was seeing—you know, the bug-eyes you teased me about when I was a teenager and came to see you in Mushenge with Papa and Mama.

Before I could stammer out a reply to Belgian football’s young star, Passy had already moved off, first to the former members of Zaïko Langa Langa, who’d come to repay in decibels some favor our boss had done for them, and then to Mamie Solution’s office. The player left two tickets for the Anderlecht–Celtic match as “a surprise for our pretty Nyota. Please give them to her along with my phone number—I’m counting on you, big sister.”

Since you used to accuse me of being overly shy, I know you won’t be surprised that I almost let the best thing in my life slip by—and almost missed out on the chance to bring Robert Dumont’s son back to Congo. You see, I categorically refused to go along with Mamie Solution’s pleas that I wait three days and then call the young Anderlecht star. “Passy is Black, born in Kin like you, but he’s a *mundele* through and through,” she insisted, “so you apply the three-day rule. Don’t call him before that, or it’s all over. And when you get him on the line, you’ve got to play your cards right, my dear. If the most handsome single guy on the Belgian championship team slips through your fingers, well, then just look in the mirror to find out what witch cast a spell on you. But who knows, huh? Maybe you prefer Youssef,

the Moroccan with the greasy hair who thinks he's the Arab George Clooney? *Balle eza na camp na yo!*"^[2] Then she stomped off, making a show of shaking her hips and that behind of hers that she slyly called "the greatest common divisor."

I didn't call after three days, not even after three weeks, but when Zuena, whom I'd asked to keep an eye on my boyfriend back in Kin—you know, the actor who brought you bottles of Johnnie Walker before I left for Europe—when my sister told me that he'd stopped calling, had just disappeared without a trace, well, I decided to go to Heysel. I took my friend Ine Vandermaelen, my Flemish sister, whose family had tried, without any luck, to help me track down the two leads Papa had given me when I left Kinshasa—you know, the former district administrator, René Comhaire, and the mysterious Mark De Groof, better known as "the king of masks."

I ne and I went to Roi Baudouin Stadium because we're crazy about football, of course, but also because I needed to get a handle on Passy Yakembo, Belgium's crush who hadn't dared look me in the eyes that evening in the restaurant—not even once—but who hoped I'd make the first move and call him. What a strange ploy for someone from Kinshasa. I was apprehensive, but my Flemish sister was encouraging. "They say he's shy with girls. He's not asking too much, he just wants to know if you're interested. Even if you're not, you're still going to congratulate him when he comes out of the locker room, and then I'll take you back home to Matonge. He's not going to throw you in the trunk of his Ferrari in front of the crowd—he's not some serial killer!"

There in the belly of Roi Baudouin, the Scots, with nerves of steel and legs like horses, riding high on the cheers coming from their twelfth man up there in the stands, thought they'd managed a scoreless game. That would mean they'd head back to Glasgow, where they could seal the Mauves' fate with a win on their home turf. Judging by the clap-o-meter, you'd have

thought our team were the visitors in their own stadium. Nothing like the frenzy you see season after season in stadiums in Kinshasa; the Brussels fans seemed to think they only needed to show support when their team lit up the scoreboard.

Zero–zero, that’s where things stood until the ninety-second minute of the match. Then, when we expected it least, a miracle took place. Racing ahead from midfield, the striker I’d come to see called for a pass from one of his teammates, a midfielder named Hendriks. Another Congolese player, Vincent Kompany, had just sent the ball to Hendriks. Kompany, whose father played in your hometown, was at the top of his game. You’d have loved to see how he turned the Mauves’ defensive line into an impenetrable fortress and then switched gears to become a game-changing passer, all in a flash.

Passy Yakembo trapped the leather on his chest and, after a bounce, took off down the field, his feet ablaze, racing sixty meters to the opposing team’s goal. Then he let loose with a blast that sent the whole stadium into a frenzy.

That go-ahead goal for the Mauves, which would play a key role in the coming encounter between Francis and me, sent a shock wave through the rows of Scottish fans. On my right, my Flemish sister was screaming for joy, shouting the scorer’s name. You’d have thought she was possessed, like one of those tormented Evangelical women in Kinshasa you always make fun of.

The Anderlecht supporters were ecstatic, on their feet, waving flags, and setting off smoke bombs. People began to whistle and shout, hollering in French, “*On a bien fini par les niquer!*”—“They’re really screwed now!”—or something in Dutch that ended with “*kleine Schotten.*” Curses in Arabic, which I couldn’t really get, and in Lingala, “*Babebi na bango*”—and just like that, I was back in Kin. I could see myself in Martyrs Stadium, at the finals of the Congo Cup with you and Zuena, just a few weeks after you’d moved to our house. You’d insisted on being there for the victory of AS Vita Club, the team that Patrice Lumumba so loved.

The euphoria barely lasted a minute before the tide turned from mauve to green-and-white. Before the pain caused by that gorgeous goal, right in the net, triggered something unexpected. The celebration born of newfound hope was drowned out by monkey howls, yes, Grandpa, monkey howls, and jeers in English—because the Scots speak English: “Monkey! Monkey! Monkey!”

Cries so loud they’d burst your eardrums, cries unlike anything anyone had ever heard in a Belgian stadium, cries no one could’ve imagined before in Heysel, but that from then on would punctuate dozens of future matches, from one end of Europe to the other.

Cries that echoed all around me, spit out by men and women, young and not so young. From laughing faces and from others twisted into grimaces; from ugly, raging, drooling mouths, all projected on the giant screen by the invisible cameras above our heads. I can still see it as if it were just yesterday, as if I were still there in that stadium in Brussels, stunned and speechless.

“Yakembo bonobo! Yakembo bonobo!”

Those cries still echo in my ears. And I remember the precise moment when, there in the belly of Roi Baudouin, we saw the man who’d given me my first seat in a European stadium just stop dead. He’d been running toward his celebrating fans; he always ran toward them to perform the now famous “dance of the caiman”—a dance that made him famous throughout Belgium, but that he had first performed when he played for Daring Club Motema Pembe in Kinshasa. He turned and raced away from his teammates, who were running toward him to celebrate, like always; he was scared. He retraced his steps, first slowly and then faster and faster, his head down, like when, under a full moon in Kinshasa, an overly zealous dancer regrets breaking away from the circle before the first drumbeats—that’s how I remember it. He grabbed the ball. Roi Baudouin had become just one enormous pit, spitting out insults in English and French: “Monkey! Monkey! Go back to your jungle!” or *“Retourne dans ta jungle le bonobo!”* Finally, he looked up and flipped off the crowd, then he leapt, as if he were

going to do a free kick, and shot the leather ball that the Belgian king had just blessed high into the air, harder than you could imagine.

In the heart of Heysel, the star of the day propelled that ball into the unknown—whether toward the gods of football or the demons of hatred, I'll let you be the judge. It didn't matter if it was a white ball with black spots, or black with white. He sent that leather ball into the unknown. The same ball that had lifted him up, made him the best scorer in the Champions League, the best the Mauves had ever seen, brought him crashing down to earth, far beneath the ground, really, back to the land of the baboons—there are no other words for it.

About ten meters from where my Flemish sister and I stood, not far from the stairs to the lower levels, two Anderlecht supporters were sitting next to the opposing team's fans. Two longtime supporters, I should note, who never missed a single important match, avidly following all the team's wins and losses since they'd been kids, just like their parents before them. In their daily life, they were both professors at the Université Libre de Bruxelles, one of the two French-speaking universities I'd set my sights on for the beautiful diploma you and Papa dreamed I would earn.

One of the two, I'm sure you've guessed, was Francis Dumont. The other was Jeff Funcken, a Flemish sociology professor. To put it into really, really simple terms in our language, what they call sociology comes down to the study of everything human beings do when they interact with each other, everything that distinguishes human communities from herds of animals, for example—but I'm oversimplifying, it's really a lot more complicated than that.

Later, those two friends, those two Belgians who'd come to the stadium to cheer on the men in mauve, those two fans who'd been hoping for that breakout goal Passy Yakembo had just given us, told me they'd been caught up in the same wave of euphoria as my Flemish sister Ine Vandermaelen. Chanting the name of the international star from Congo, they were

imagining the celebration spreading to the Grand-Place, one of the most beautiful spots in the capital, when the cries of “*Yakembo bonobo!*” froze them in their seats, too stunned to move.

Fate was not kind to our two professors that evening. No, their dream of a night on the town was cut short because, just a few meters from where my Flemish sister and I were sitting, the shot that the Mauve attacker had sent into the stands with the full force of the fury that had eclipsed his short-lived joy, crash-landed on the head of Professor Funcken. Jeff Funcken, a sixty-something who drags his old bones around like a hunter bent under a rifle too heavy for his frame, had blood coming out of his nose. The poor guy was woozy and couldn’t walk; somehow his friend and colleague, who’s almost fifteen years younger, managed to get him out of the crowd and then out of the stadium with the help of two strangers and a student who’d recognized them.

Francis took the victim to Clinique Saint-Jean in the center of town, the hospital where the sociologist’s partner works, a Pygmy woman he’d married several years before in a hamlet hidden in the depths of our equatorial forest. Yes, you heard me right; in the 1990s, Monsieur Funcken had retreated to our equatorial forest with a research project that would solidify his reputation as a sociologist, long before his work as a speaker and theater director got him into all sorts of trouble.

And that Jeff Funcken, you’ll soon learn, is not just an exceptional scientist, ready to leave his native Belgium and get caught up in the “hospitality and sexuality among the Pygmies of the Congo basin.” The Belgians have nicknamed him “Jeff the African,” and he’s really an incredible guy. In your long eighty-five years in the land of our ancestors, you haven’t met three like him. But what I really want you to remember is that he’s the man who opened our eyes, Francis’s and mine, to a Belgium that neither of us really knew. Monsieur Funcken effectively showed us the Belgium of Robert Dumont, the hidden country of the last man your daughter spoke to when she was in a hospital bed in Brussels, in a room something like the one we’re in tonight, just a bit more comfortable.

[1.](#) “You know what I mean.”

[2.](#) “The ball is in your court, it’s up to you to play.”

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2

In all the confusion at the end of the match, I lost sight of Passy Yakembo. But the gesture he'd made there in front of more than fifty thousand fans had left me shaken to the core. You can't have forgotten how emotional I am; remember how I sobbed each time we watched that film that you wanted to see again and again, about the life of the great Zulu chief assassinated by his two half brothers? While I was unaware of the consequences of that gesture for one of his own fans, who'd been sitting only a few meters away from me in the stadium, between the two opposing camps, I kept turning it over again and again in my mind—the scene even took over my dreams that night.

The following day the incident was analyzed down to the smallest details in the restaurant where I still worked. I had no other choice, really. I should explain that L'Apogée du Manioc is the most popular Congolese restaurant in Brussels. Did I tell you on the phone? It's where Congolese couples get together and break up, where you can pick up for pennies the high-priced designer clothes that the *mindele* get from fancy boutiques like Armani, Versace, and Vuitton. People flock there from cities as far away as London, Queen Elisabeth's capital, hoping to meet some rumba star on his way to the studio so they can work out a deal and get mentioned in a song—you know how it is in Congo, everything has a price.

Between two kebabs of *ntaba*, the grilled goatmeat that is the house specialty, clients kept their eyes glued to the weekend's match on the big screen. Mamie Solution wanted no part of the debate; too many eavesdroppers all around, she raged, snarling with a grimace at anyone who asked what she thought, "I don't have the money to line the pockets of

some lawyer, so I'm not saying anything tonight, *mwana na mwana, bendana!*"^[1]

Later, after I heard an interview Passy gave to a sports reporter from RTBF, the French-speaking network in Belgium, I decided to call him.

On-camera, the player had thanked his two teammates who'd protested by leaving the field. He didn't judge those who'd made a different choice: "I'm trying to put myself in their shoes and so I say that it wasn't really clear in the moment." He apologized to the Mauve fans for losing his cool, but maintained that if he had to do it again, he'd do the same thing, because he was a wild beast, not a wet hen, because he was born and raised in Yolo Sud—and if anyone didn't know what that meant, they should go to Kin. "Yolo Sud's no joke," he said, talking about the neighborhood where I was born, too—our ratty neighborhood that no one had ever cared about. But once he gave that interview, it was in all the papers. The French station TV5 Monde even sent a reporter there to shove a microphone in front of his relatives and all his old buddies who'd turned out badly.

Passy seemed exhausted. He was limping on his right foot, babbling in a mixture of French and Lingala, thanking Belgium and Congo, and stressing that his gesture was nothing heroic. "I'm a football player who demands respect and fair play. I'm not Nelson Mandela, *moto akosa bino te.*"^[2] I realized why this made me so uncomfortable. He sounded like a guy trying to recite a speech he hadn't had the time to learn; each time he lost the thread of his ideas, he retreated to his mother tongue.

Thinking back, it was then and there, in my little third-floor room on rue de la Paix, near the Porte de Namur, that I first entertained the idea of bringing out the Nelson Mandela in that guy from Yolo Sud, the inner voice he was trying so hard to keep muzzled. A Mandela he refused to reveal to the people who'd proclaimed him king without thinking about the color of his skin or his past as a kid on the rough streets of Yolo Sud. I didn't know if I'd be meeting the star anytime soon, but I really think that's when the

idea of making him choose between the wild beast he claimed to be and the cowardly face he put on for his public first ran through my head. I remembered the words of a wise Nigerian, before a Nobel Prize in Literature had turned him into a global icon: “The tiger does not proclaim his tigritude, he pounces, grabs his prey and devours it—period.”

At the very end, in a voice that revealed his discomfort, the player apologized to Professor Funcken. “Those close to me know I have only respect and admiration for Jeff the African. I challenge anyone to name two Belgians who’ve done as much as the professor for men and women who look like me. It was bad luck that the ball landed on him—I haven’t slept all night because of it. I want to express my sympathy for his wife, who’s a compatriot of mine. I pray for his speedy recovery...”

■ called him early the next afternoon.

He picked up after the fourth ring and exploded: “I told you a thousand times—I’m not giving any more interviews. Just contact the club and leave me the fuck a—”

I hurried to introduce myself, then congratulated him on his performance that weekend. After a moment of surprise, the beast turned into a kitten. You know what I mean, he’s a man who knows what he wants. Even overwhelmed by all the attention his gesture had gotten from the press, Passy knew what he wanted. And what he wanted, what he’d been dreaming about since his visit to L’Apogée du Manioc, convinced him to apologize to me and quickly. To me—who didn’t know what to make of his attention; who at any moment could be taken to the border in handcuffs, *manu militari* to quote the Belgian-Moroccan lawyer Mamie Solution had dug up for me—the wunderkind of the king of sports was expressing his sincere apologies.

I immediately let him know that I’d loved his gesture; it was a moment of real humanity and he shouldn’t regret it in the least. After a long silence, Passy answered that I didn’t, couldn’t, understand. He’d probably just

thrown away any chance of joining the English Premier League, and that was really nothing to be proud of. After getting that off his chest, he calmed down. A man who knows what he wants will always find a way to stack the odds in his favor, whether the woman he's got in his sights is jaded or really vulnerable. "Why am I talking to you about football, Nyota, when I should be offering you a Kir Royal here at my place in Auderghem?"—that's the line the seducer pulled out to make sure his arrow hit home.

Rather than going on a bender, I retorted, he should go visit the professor who, according *Le Soir*, the newspaper I'd leafed through at the restaurant, had just been released from the hospital.

Foremost in my mind was what Mamie Solution had told me about the victim, once her first wave of anger had passed. Jeff the African had made a name for himself by publishing a book, *The Fall of the Father*, in which the sociologist challenged the idea of progress that had fueled the colonial enterprise, from the arrival of the first colonizers in Congo to the independence you witnessed firsthand. His second offense came two years later, when he earned the ire of other Belgian intellectuals, including some upper-level administrators at his university who threatened to fire him. You see, the professor published an opinion piece in several papers across the country calling on the government to respond to allegations in a book published by another Fleming—Mamie Solution didn't know who. He called for the creation of two parliamentary commissions, one to catalog the damage caused by the idea of progress in Central Africa under Léopold II and the other to shed light on the role Belgium was presumed to have played in the assassination of your hero Patrice Lumumba. You won't be surprised that Monsieur Funcken himself became the white hero of a significant portion of the Blacks living in his country, even as tracts circulated around his university calling him a sellout and demanding nothing less than his physical elimination.

The hatred coming his way right then would have been enough to make anyone with even an ounce of common sense throw in the towel. After all, dying for your opinions may well be heroic, but it's far better to live and see them flower in the minds of others— isn't that what you said made you

saddest after your hero was martyred? I won't go so far as to proclaim Jeff the African the Belgian Lumumba, but I will say that there are men who only really feel alive when the shadow of the irreparable hangs over their head. Need I remind you that you, too, in another life, were one of those forces of nature that nothing stops, at least until the tragedy that shattered us all, the disappearance of my Ndoyi.

After one really courageous act in 2001, Jeff the African was propelled from being an advocate for the natives of the postcolony to a sort of living legend, greeted as a great Bantu chief whenever Africans gathered in Belgium. Let me give you a quick version of what happened that day. According to my guardian angel, it happened on a sunny morning, July 21, the Belgian national holiday. Monsieur Funcken made it past security at the Brussels airport and reached a plane that had been chartered to take a group of Sudanese children who were being deported back to their country, which was in the middle of a war. In front of the television cameras that he'd alerted just beforehand, the professor threatened to hang himself from one of the wings of the plane waiting to take off unless the deportation was canceled and the children reenrolled in local schools.

Can you imagine that the hotheaded teacher not only got what he demanded from the authorities but he provoked a crisis in the government that led to the resignation of the minister of homeland security. Several Belgian newspapers named him "man of the year," a Greek organization with communist leanings honored him by establishing a Funcken Prize for Generosity and Solidarity, and a German town by the name of Ratzeburg gave him the key to the city.

Mamie Solution concluded her story, saying, "That's why Jeff the African is our Gandhi, my dear. And if nothing I've said explains why your Passy couldn't have screwed things up any worse, then take tram 71 to the Université Libre de Bruxelles. Stand by the main door, on avenue Adolphe Buyl. After a while, you'll end up seeing a white man of a certain age arrive on a bike, wearing an African-print shirt and a straw hat. Don't hesitate to strike up a conversation with him in Lingala—he speaks five Bantu languages perfectly, just like a native."

I didn't go through all of that on the phone, I just kept it simple and told Passy that a Belgian known as Jeff the African couldn't be a scoundrel, or I really didn't understand anything about Belgium at all. "Excuses on television aren't enough. You should pay him a visit and apologize in person, brother," I urged him, albeit halfheartedly.

The leading scorer of the Jupiler Pro League interrupted me with a snort. He wasn't my brother and never, not even once had he dreamed of his sisters back in Kin. Still, he'd take my advice—I'd soon discover and come to love his self-effacing humor. He added that he'd come get me wherever I was and together we'd pay a visit to the sociologist—he'd gotten his address from his agent who, he whispered, agreed with me. I called my Flemish sister to reschedule the visit we'd planned to the Université catholique de Louvain, just outside Brussels. And that's how I ended up accompanying the player to the home of that sixty-something professor who, several years earlier, had taken under his wing a young colleague by the name of Francis Dumont—a friend who'd helped him face up to his alcohol problem.

[SKIP NOTES](#)

[1.](#) "Let everyone just go home quietly."

[2.](#) "Don't let anyone tell you nonsense."

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A true friend is a shelter when storms rage and danger lurks—that’s what you often said to encourage us to form friendships that were based on neither self-interest nor the pernicious rule of give-and-take. Your own true friendship came to light when you were laid low by malaria five years ago and, for the first time, our fear of losing you overshadowed our laughter at the jokes you always make when things are really bleak. Then your old friend the *moaridi* arrived from Kasai. He’d been your shadow in a previous life, until that fateful day when you succumbed to the shame of losing Princess Tshala and the totemic necklace—symbol of the wild parrot’s protection. You opted for exile and anonymity over the magnificent throne you’d inherited from your ancestor Woto.

Francis Dumont, the faithful friend, was at Jeff Funcken’s bedside that afternoon. When we arrived, the sociologist threw himself into the arms of the star striker whose team won the Belgian cup. You should have seen it. You should have seen that scrawny Belgian, still convalescing, grab ahold of that big strong guy, over six foot and almost two hundred pounds, shouting like a kid how happy he was to wrap his arms around his “god of the stadium.” He barely even noticed me, only saying in passing, “Your name is Nyota Kwete? That’s from Kasai, a Kuba name or I have to give back my diplomas.” You should have seen Professor Funcken beam when he saw the gift Passy brought, a Mauve #10 jersey. “Just a little something for the fan, but really for how you’ve spoken out for us, Jeff the African.”

Once he’d introduced us to his friend, the professor waved away the apologies that a visibly uncomfortable Passy tried to stammer out. The real

issue, Jeff contended, were the shouts heard in the belly of the stadium, “shouts that defined the lines, champ, and showed how the Beast is gaining ground in its battle for the heart of Europe. Proof, such as it is, that it’s in our best interest to throw all our weight into the fight, and not just put our faith in the endless trap of universal suffrage, are you with me?” But that was an issue he’d tackle in due time, with all necessary seriousness and strategy. No need to apologize for a simple accident—things like that happen every day. “We’re not talking about the drama that played out in Heysel in May 1985, when Turin’s Juventus and Liverpool showed the whole sporting world what hell really looks like. Then, just one hour before Michel Platini scored on a penalty kick, I saw Death dancing overhead. We certainly aren’t going to make a ruckus about a little detour to the Clinique Saint-Jean, champ. Besides, as you and your girlfriend can see, I’m here with Professor Dumont, an amazing guy who looks out for my old bones, so my wife can make herself beautiful at the salon in Matonge; we’re going to an Ivorian wedding on Saturday.”

What dear Professor Funcken wanted to do right then was to compare what he’d heard with the champ’s version of things, to find out if rumor had it right, if Passy’s grandfather was one of the crafters of what he called “the foundational myth of a free Congo.” The sociologist described a historic match that I’m sure you remember, the only football match that’s earned a place in our country’s history books. The one that took place on January 4, 1959, in Tata Raphaël Stadium, between Mikado FC—really, just a team made up of natives who’d come onto the field barefoot, eleven swarthy athletes whose only gris-gris was their evident pride—and a white team made up of masters ready to send their adversaries back to their daily rumba. A match that saw the black ant make a meal of the white elephant. A match that lit the fuse when Black euphoria turned into protests across Léopoldville, skirmishes that erased the border between the white city and

the native quarters, where for several months the long-constrained winds of freedom had begun to blow.

The Fleming invoked the match that would lead the Belgian king in his palace to proclaim words that had been unimaginable just one week earlier. Since the Congolese now had their sights set on the promised land of *dipanda*, said Baudouin I, overtaken by events none of his advisers had foreseen, Belgium would lead them to it, “without harmful procrastination, but also without thoughtless haste,” a phrase consecrated in our history—a phrase I’ve often heard you echo with a bitter laugh on each anniversary of your hero’s death.

After Passy confirmed his paternal grandfather was, in fact, one of the protagonists of that little drama that set the scene for the main act, but before he even mentioned his father, the star player for the Leopards of Zaire, Jeff the African was giddy with delight. It was a dream come true.

You’d have thought Passy had just given him the key to a treasure chest. The Fleming was so excited that he launched into a speech about the power of blood, the sacred, even mystical, nature of transmission. “We become what we receive, champ, that’s why we’re going to do something amazing with the blood that flows through your veins, *Mwana mboka*.^[1] In this world where fear keeps signing up new recruits, we’re going to build a beautiful and compelling monument to the king of sports and harmony among peoples. You and I, we’re going to prove to the Beast that it’s no use expanding the battlefield, laying siege to our stadiums while hiding behind a disguise more subtle than the one used in Germany in 1933. It’ll take more than villainous laws and screaming degenerates for hate to emerge victorious. If you want proof that every cloud has a silver lining, just think about your goal against Scotland, are you with me?”

He again hugged the three-time Belgian champion and then exclaimed, with all the verve of one of our unforgettable Kuba storytellers, “As the Bangala back in your country say, *Mwana ya nkoyi azali nkoyi*!”^[2]

Elated by the smiles on the faces of his African visitors, the polyglot sociologist went even further. Now he took aim at his Walloon friend. He started teasing Francis, who, focused on a painting hanging on the opposite wall, had been listening with half an ear—clearly he was used to his colleague’s impulsiveness. Our host baited him, opening a small, almost undetectable breach in the barricades that kept me from discovering the real identity of the stranger who was now staring at me with an intensity that any woman with half an ounce of sense would have correctly read, no question.

Jeff the African reproached Francis Dumont for continuing to act as if the law professor who published books praised by his fellows, or the legal counsel sought after by those big companies with long teeth, also known as multinationals, would have reached even greater heights had the blood of a certain Robert Dumont not flowed in his veins.

Passy winked at me. Our eyes turned toward the target of the joke, and I saw a flash of exasperation beneath the three-day beard—his face reminded me of an American actor whose name I can’t remember. I recognized the grimace of embarrassment, you know, the face you put on when you answer a joker who’s always repeating the same line. “What you pretend to ignore, African, is that I am a self-made man. When I decided to leave the family home, the Belgian you call my father, unlike the elder Yakembo, gave the adolescent me no reason to take pride in anything I might’ve inherited from his successes. Unless, of course, you think money buys happiness.”

Then it was my turn to discreetly pinch the player who was also struggling to figure out this new twist in the conversation. What we got was an oblique and flowery response from the sociologist. Jeff the African came to the defense of the elder Dumont, no angel to be sure, but also not Belgium’s worst. Then he evoked a man who’ll later play a central role in the story of my Ndoyi’s disappearance, declaring that if his friend were talking about Monsieur Guido Martens De Neuberg, the indictment would have been scathing and without appeal. “That old maniac who disappeared after Expo 58 had no more scruples in his youth than those little tyrants Belgium inflicted on our Congolese friends. How Robert Dumont got

caught up with a piece of garbage like that will never make any sense to me!”

Jeff the African maintained that all Robert Dumont lacked was a valiant heart and the courage befitting a great mind. He ended his defense by declaring that at age forty-six, a son who’s learned life’s lessons should be able to overcome his father’s failings, “or else you just don’t deserve the beautiful Nathalie Tielemans whom you’re betraying each time your eyes linger on our Kuba friend here. Am I wrong that it’s not because you’re admiring her very beautiful necklace that you haven’t stopped staring at her since she and her suitor arrived? When you talk to our friend Nyota, look at her eyes, like I do, Dumont Jr. It’s good for your heart rate, are you with me?”

Yes, Grandpa, I’m sure that you, who saw men and women of all sorts bow down before you, must’ve met a few like this Jeff the African. Both crazy and sweet, born provocateurs, incorrigibly cheeky, most often capable of the best but sometimes the worst, and always unpredictable.

While his friend was clearly offended by what we’d just heard, our host turned to Passy, patted him on the back, and whispered, in a falsely confidential tone, “You know full well, champ, the world’s a joyous shit show and women are what make it livable.”

Then he said something to Francis that poked another hole in my ignorance about the law professor. “What I meant, Dumont Jr., is that the drama of your childhood and the ditch it dug between you and your father when you were about to turn seventeen is a chapter you should have closed long ago. No doubt you’ll be offended to hear me say it again in front of our Congolese friends, who are blissfully unaware of what a pest I am, but allow me to repeat myself: You are absolutely wrong to keep feeding your resentment of a man who’s been gone for a good dozen years now. It’s all the more absurd since you’re far past the age at which a man is supposed to take stock of the challenges of fatherhood, a fatherhood you’re well on your way to, it seems.”

Francis laughed in his face, a laugh that made clear that, for him, the sociologist’s words were just a bad joke. Getting ahold of himself, my

friend, who's here beside me now, then affirmed in a most serious voice that he did not want to have a child. That question had been resolved long ago, and the woman with whom he shared his life had known since day one. Instead of admitting defeat, Jeff the African just grew indignant. The Fleming leapt to his feet and, waving his arms like an evangelist in the pulpit, took Passy and me as his witnesses. As if we had any idea about the woman at the heart of the exchange we'd just heard, he asked us what sort of brute could seduce one of the most extraordinary women on the faculty of the Université Libre de Bruxelles only to refuse to give her a child. "Can you tell me, my friends, what sort of imbecile would do such a thing?"

The arrival of a child—in the end, that's what it took for Francis Dumont to confront the cloud of bitterness that had long surrounded his image of his father. He needed a child before he could take the leap evoked by his friend and lift the veil from a swath of his deceased father's life, revealing the circumstances that led to the disappearance of my Ndoyi forty-six years earlier.

Still, while the sun was slowly sinking into the dampness of night, and as our host finally changed his tune and offered us a round of beers, there were still a few plot twists between us and the arrival of that beautiful child to whom we owe so much. I'm talking now of the marvelous little girl who, just yesterday evening, accompanied us to the terminal in Zaventem airport, where we boarded our flight to Kinshasa.

[SKIP NOTES](#)

[1.](#) "Child of the land" in Lingala.

[2.](#) "The leopard cub has the strength of a leopard."

The drama of his childhood and the “moat” it had dug—so deep it had separated him and his father for good—Francis would only reveal that to me much later. A bit of irony on fate’s part or a maneuver organized by the spirits of our people who wanted me to finish what they’d begun? Either way, it happened just a few days before the professor-cum-lawyer learned that his girlfriend was pregnant “by accident”—that detail surely makes you smile, you who one day declared to my sister that pregnancy wasn’t a cold you caught by shaking the pastor’s hand.

I heard pretty much the whole story; my friend unburdened himself, holding almost nothing back. Was that baring of the soul just a strategic move for this man who, despite the presence at my side of the player he so admired, didn’t seem in a hurry to follow his friend’s advice and honor the woman he said he loved? Or did he need to confide in a stranger whose judgment, if ever expressed, wouldn’t trouble his sleep? Even today, I really don’t know. In the end, it doesn’t much matter, since the Spirit of the Parrot that protects the necklace of Queen Mother Ngokady finally completed its solemn mission before your soul left us for good.

The conversation took place about three weeks after that first meeting at the sociologist’s. In his typically insistent style—he is, after all, a man of the stage—Jeff the African invited Passy and me to the opening of the play he was putting on with his student troupe. “A play with a solid right hook, my friends. Belgium will take a blow to the gut, like it or not. You, children of Lumumba’s Congo, you can’t miss it for anything in the world, are you

with me? I'm inviting you as both author and director, so you just can't refuse." That was his pitch to convince us.

Passy, whom I was getting to know in a rather more, um...shall we say intimate way, even though I wasn't hitching my wagon to his star—after each date I wondered when he was going to wake up and realize that I wasn't worth the least of the girls who fantasized about him in Brussels—well, Passy just politely declined the invitation. In part, even though my man never admitted as much to me, because he feared that our new Flemish friend, who'd started calling to check in on us almost every day, would exploit his presence at the show to recruit him in what he called his all-out battle against the Beast.

But he had a watertight excuse, specifically, a trip to Paris where he and his agent would meet a representative of Manchester City FC. Passy had been dreaming about joining that English team for years, but it had been sending conflicting signals over the final weeks of the season. After the incident at Roi Baudouin Stadium and all the brouhaha that ensued, Passy was anxious to know where he stood, whether he'd be staying in Belgium or not.

Francis was meeting a client not far from the Porte de Namur and offered to pick me up on his way back. He suggested we have dinner in a restaurant near the university before the play. He also mentioned that he'd happened upon a book about the art of the Kuba Kingdom. Since Jeff the African had let it drop that I was Kuba—and I hadn't contradicted him—he wanted my opinion on whether the Belgian who'd written the book really deserved the reputation he seemed to enjoy in the art world.

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After admitting that he'd left the book in his car, Francis asked me whether the necklace I was wearing was for sale in any of the African boutiques in Matonge. I replied that you'd have to be a bourgeois living in Watermael-Boitsfort, Brussels's fanciest neighborhood, to imagine that Black Africa was selling itself bit by bit in the boutiques in Matonge. He

didn't take offense. Between two bites, and far from indiscreet ears, I confided that I was of royal blood, and that the object he so admired held particular symbolic importance for the Kubas.

You'd have been proud of me, even if not really surprised. After all, when we came to Mushenge, wasn't I the one who sat at your feet for hours, asking you a thousand and one questions, sometimes really crazy ones, while my sister preferred the company of our cousins, who were just as curious about our city-girl ways?

I told him about our kingdom, its origins. I told him about the role one of our queen mothers played long ago in the development of our artistic traditions. About what we were before the arrival of the ethnologists Emil Torday and Leo Frobenius—Papa always talked about those two, who in their writing asserted that the cultural blossoming of our kingdom at the turn of the last century recalled either Augustus's Roman Empire or ancient China. I went on about what postcolonial Congo has retained of the centuries-old epic of our sovereigns. Coming back to the necklace, I stressed that if I had been a daughter of Nyimi in the same way that my father, now a sergeant in the Congolese police, was a royal prince, then my necklace would be slightly different. I'd wear a necklace with a matching ivory pendant representing the most illustrious and celebrated woman of my kingdom, Queen Mother Ngokady, of blessed and eternal memory, the ancestor who ensured that the story of our arts traveled across the seas. And in that case, I added, I wouldn't have stepped foot outside the borders of the kingdom wearing that sacred object, which was far more valuable than the copy I wore as a sign of my identity. A copy that only our people and a few Belgian connoisseurs would recognize—and then only if they'd really delved into our cultural patrimony during their studies, as his friend had done for the traditions of the Pygmies of the central basin in Équateur Province.

I must admit straight out that I was hesitant about evoking my Ndoyi. She'd been on my mind, but for some vague reason, her name didn't cross my lips until the end of the meal. Maybe because you'd told me, after I'd explained the dead ends my Flemish sister and I had run into after our

research, that I should let go of the burden of the past and focus entirely on earning the diploma we would celebrate once I returned to Congo. Maybe because I had a strange sense that evoking the princess's memory, and all we'd never learned about her trip from Léopoldville to Brussels in 1958, would necessarily reopen a path shrouded in mists, and that made me feel anxious and queasy. Or was it because Passy, to whom I'd confided this family enigma, had explained that over time some mysteries take root in our lives, and we shouldn't put all our energy and courage into resolving them? "You seem to put a lot of faith in the spirits of your Bakuba ancestors, Nyota. If your faith is justified, then the spirit of your Ndoyi knows better than your family why the ugly truth doesn't need to be revealed to your eyes," the football player had said. My Passy is truly a Mongo sage, for that's the ethnicity of his parents.

Let Francis coordinate things with Jeff the African, who wanted to be sure we'd arrive together at the little theater. "Your ducks better put on a good show tonight, African. It's not just any guest I'm bringing. Hold on to your hat, my friend. You may know more about Africa and Congo than anyone, but tonight a Bakuba princess, a real one, with proof of identity, is coming to see the satire that may cost you the few friends you have left in this country."

Then I answered his questions. My studies. How I spent my time when I wasn't at the restaurant. How I'd met the striker for the Mauves. What I thought about the incident at Roi Baudouin Stadium and everything my boyfriend had said to the media since. "Do you know who handles his com? Because our handsome Passy Yakembo has been struggling since that match against Glasgow." Finally, he came back to my family, asking if you all knew about my relationship with the player, a relationship that clearly was becoming too much of an obsession for him.

That's when I asked him to tell me about the father-son relationship his buddy had brought up that night at his home in Forest. I wanted to know

what could make a man his age turn so cold at the slightest mention of the one whose name he bore, the same name he used for his legal practice.

That's when this stranger, who's come more than six thousand kilometers from home to be with me in this hospital, poured out his heart, sharing his sad and unsettling story. The tale of a son who'd spent the last thirty years shouldering the weight of a conflict that appeared unsolvable, especially since death had carried away his father and condemned him to continue down that blind alley alone.

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As Francis explained it to me there in *Flagrants Délices*, a French restaurant where he had a regular table, his tragic tale began with the death of his mother in a skiing accident in the Swiss Alps in 1972. Francis was then fourteen, his older sister, Bénédicte, was sixteen, and his younger brother, Sébastien, who had Down syndrome, was only seven.

Their newly widowed father had had a very successful career in the world of finance before becoming one of the richest bankers in the country, something the whole country learned when his friend, who'd been ennobled by the king, the Baron Guido Martens De Neuberg, made him his principal collaborator on the organizing committee for the Brussels World's Fair in 1958. You remember that great world event—a few years ago you told us that, at the request of the governor-general of the Belgian Congo, Kuba weavers had sent the best of their creations, which were never returned to Kasai or Sankuru.

What you didn't know, and what Francis wasn't aware of that day when our paths crossed in his friend's home, is that your daughter, my Ndoyi, our princess, played a part in that great planetary gathering—although she was not an attention seeker. Soon I'll tell you just what role hers was. I'm going to keep talking as long as that monitor they've got you hooked up to confirms your vital signs are good, as long as that blue sheet continues to rise and fall with the breath that joins you to us and to this truth you've longed for, never certain it would be discovered. If ever my monologue

drags on, you just move one of your legs and I'll let you enjoy the night's silence.

Let me come back to the tragedy that devastated Francis and his family.

That evening, my friend told me that on her deathbed, Madame Dumont entrusted her elder son with a responsibility that would weigh heavily on his future: to watch over Sébastien, the fragile child who would certainly suffer the mockery of other children once he started school. Francis took that responsibility very seriously, doing the best he could, until the accident that changed everything and led to the break that seemed to obsess Jeff the African.

A second awful accident took place on a winter night at the Dumont family home in a part of Brussels known as Uccle. That night, when their father, who'd refused to remarry, had thrown an elaborate party to celebrate his daughter's nineteenth birthday, tragedy struck. A fire destroyed the house and everything that the banker and his two elder children couldn't save. But most of all, the fire took Sébastien from them—the child who suffered from an ailment that had had his parents and then just his father running from hospital to hospital, from Belgium to England, via France. That night, a somber-faced Francis told me, despite all the confusion, his father had managed to save documents that would allow him to acquire in the next few months one of the most sought-after banks in Belgium. He saved important papers but not his child with Down syndrome. Sébastien's brother had tried to save him from the flames, but he lost consciousness and collapsed at the foot of the smoke-filled stairs. He had to be pulled from the fire himself. His left arm was quite badly burned—and he still bears scars medicine hasn't been able to heal.

Grandpa, those are the circumstances that led the seventeen-year-old to leave the family home, filled with anger and spite, blaming his father for putting money ahead of the life of the brother he'd made a solemn promise to protect as his mother was on her deathbed.

One reason for his anger, my friend explained, was a conversation he'd heard years before between his parents. It was at a time when his brother was having crisis after crisis, and his father, no doubt swept up in a spiral of

pain and powerlessness, burst into tears and asked out loud what he'd done that the Good Lord had given him such a cross to bear. Those words took root in the mind of an eight-year-old boy, and later led the adolescent Francis to believe his father had chosen to correct the injustice done when fate had used marked cards to deal him a bad hand in the game of fatherhood.

If he'd stayed in the family home, once his first wave of sorrow had passed, Francis would have understood that when his father said he'd "forgotten all about" Sébastien being in the house, it was because the child had spent the previous five nights in the hospital, and that in all the confusion, he hadn't had the reflex to run up this his son's room on the third floor. While he unconsciously thought the child was on the other side of town, under the care of doctors, two minutes was all it took for death to sow desolation. The adolescent had interpreted his father's explanation—words clearly poorly chosen—that "he'd forgotten all about him" through the lens of a mourning both sudden and unbearable.

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Francis decided to go live with one of his aunts in Rhode-Saint-Genèse, a town not far from Brussels. Two years later, he moved with some friends to an apartment not far from the Université Libre de Bruxelles, where he'd enrolled to study law. No need to say that when his father was diagnosed with brain cancer in 1989 and died the following year at the age of seventy-nine, the boy who'd long since become a man refused to pay his respects. He was steadfast in that refusal despite the desperate pleas of his sister, despite the exhortations of Bénédicte's godfather, Baron Guido Martens De Neuberg, whose friendship with the deceased had been tested many times over the years.

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Do you remember that sad story you told us, about the quarrel that soured the relationship between you and Papa for four long years? Do

you remember how my father reacted when you suggested he move to the city and take up either politics or a military career? When you explained that the world the Belgians had left us was like a goat's jaw, always chewing and rechewing the same things? One season was filled with uncertainty and the next turned out well, but was followed by another unpredictable year—an endless trap that made you say it was time for Kuba royalty to accept, for better or worse, that its fate was tied to the vagaries of history now that Congo had bowed down before a white totem known as democracy. Well, if Papa's recriminations spread out over four years, if it took him that many cycles of dry and rainy seasons to recognize that he never should've doubted your wisdom and needed to make amends, my friend Francis spent more than twenty-five winters avoiding his father's shadow. True to himself, the future lawyer-cum-professor even went so far as to refuse the inheritance the banker left him.

That evening at Flagrants Délices, as we enjoyed a final Leffe before heading to the theater, Francis confided something that would later confirm my intuition.

He confessed that pride was responsible for his refusal to back down even after he'd reassessed his father's responsibility in the tragic loss of his younger brother—there was no use denying it. Since he'd received high honors for his studies—financed by money his mother had left him and odd jobs on campus—he knew there was nothing that could make him knock on Robert Dumont's door. Still, he was haunted by the face of a man at once familiar and distant: Baron Guido Martens De Neuberg, his deceased father's close friend who'd become one of the most famous Belgians of his generation, despite having been abandoned by his exceptionally wealthy father when he was just three years old.

What we didn't yet know was that Francis's refusal to go to his father's deathbed had kept him from hearing for himself the secret that had weighed on the bow-tied banker, as he was called, since he'd been involved in the Brussels World's Fair. But that crucial knot would soon be undone thanks to Jeff the African—it seems the Spirit of the Parrot chose that Fleming to secure day's final triumph over oppressive night.

No surprise, the spectacle staged by our sociologist friend had drawn a large crowd. And not just people like me who admired his audacity or who were fascinated when they'd heard him speak—because anyone who listened realized that he lived and breathed only to fulfill the mission assigned to him at birth by a pitiless god.

A few days earlier, when over the phone Passy'd heard the title of the play, *Tintin's Testicles*, he almost choked on his *chikwangue*.^[1] “What are you getting into this time, African?” he asked. “Listen, believe it or not, back when I started in the amateur league, I played with a cousin of mine, a horndog who managed in one year to impregnate both his mother's best friend and the wife of his pastor in Yolo Sud—a feat that earned him, I swear to God, the nickname of Tintin, in other words, the king of tricks, if you see what I mean. Are you trying to tell me, professor, that you crossed paths back in Congo with a certain Jules Kimbiolongo, my aunt's youngest son, and that the play you wrote about ‘these testicles’—”

The author cut him off there. “There's no lack of tricksters in the land of Mobutu, we can agree on that, champ. I knew guys far more twisted than your Jules, I swear. It would require someone with a pen mightier than even Samuel Beckett's, when he was at his best, to bring to life on the stage characters like those in Équateur or Yolo Sud, a part of town I know as well as the north of Brussels and its car thieves, are you with me? Let's just say that if you can't reschedule that visit to our French friends, then send me the beautiful Nyota. After she's seen the play, your Dulcinea can explain why mine bears the name of Tintin. And while you're discussing transfers and piles of cash with your hosts, just don't forget, even for a second, that there are things far more important than money: You and I have a date with the future of European football. We can't count on God or the devil to get us out of the trap the Beast has laid for us—are you with me, champ?”

When Francis and I arrived at the theater in Bois de la Cambre, after cutting across avenue de Diane and coming up the chemin du Gymnase, the police had already set up a security cordon at the top of the chemin du

Crépuscule—okay, don't worry about all those street names, they really don't matter. Just try to imagine the scene playing out when we got there. People were shouting "No to Eurafrica!" "Stop the Great Dilution!" "Funcken to the crapper, Islam to the pigsty, Blacks into the sea!" and, in English, "Funcken, go fuck yourself!" I really don't have the nerve to translate everything they were saying, but there were dozens of protestors, self-proclaimed friends of Tintin wearing T-shirts emblazoned with *De Kameraden van Kuifje—Les Amis de Tintin* marching up and down the sidewalk. They were taunting the men in uniform, shouting angrily at our Flemish friend, whose play was clearly no more and no less than an act of provocation. "This time he may have gone too far," an increasingly nervous Francis whispered. It was like a battle between hunting dogs and a pack of jackals, the first advancing, teeth bared, the others beating a confused retreat only to leap back all at once to charge the police and their flailing billy clubs.

What the play was about is a part of reality you certainly know better than I do. One that Francis admitted he'd only gotten wind of vaguely. He reminded me, sort of apologetically, that while he wasn't uninterested in colonial history, he was far from a specialist. "Very humbly and unlike our friend the African, I can only recall the platitudes served up in secondary school, not enough to keep the attention of a historian over dinner. Am I trying to make up for lost time? Well, yes."

The part of reality that Jeff the African had brought to the stage was the story of the thousands of children born in your day, during the colonial era, with a Belgian father and an African mother. What the playwright would later explain, and again, this won't surprise you, is that since the colonial power saw the mixing of races as a challenge to white supremacy, mixed-race children, whatever the circumstances of their birth, were looked upon with suspicion by the administration. They carried within them the seeds of a much-feared native revolt. I remember one of my secondary-school teachers telling us that very few of those children were recognized by their Belgian fathers—most were either abandoned with their mothers or taken away and placed in orphanages run by nuns. When *dipanda* came, Jeff the

African explained, some left the former colony, carried away in the luggage of a father who had bigger worries than asking for the consent of a woman who represented no more than a mistake in a colonizer's life.

Tintin's Testicles was really a metaphor for what our witty author called "a colonial trap that has got the former all-powerful master where it hurts." In the play, one of those abandoned children, Pierre Bakolapa, learns from his mother on his eighteenth birthday that he is the son of a Belgian journalist named Guy Petitjean, better known as Tintin. Like many of his companions, the great reporter refused to recognize his son before he fled back to the metropole in the confusion of independence, right when you were running from one *nganga*^[2] to another in Kasai, trying to find out what had happened to the princess and the sacred necklace of Queen Mother Ngokady.

So our hero makes it to Belgium after a series of adventures worthy of a warrior. He begins searching for his mysterious progenitor, with no other clues than an old yellow ID card he'd found in the pocket of a suit coat left at his mother's by her terrified ex-boyfriend. The young man ends his travels in Flanders. Pierre Bakolapa gets caught up in a music festival near Antwerp, the second most important city in Belgium, and embarks on a night of heavy drinking with a band of misfits. In the wee hours of the morning, he crosses paths with another group of young partiers who mistake him for a serial rapist whose picture had been posted around town. Unable to plead his innocence in a language he doesn't speak—not even one damned word—what do you think happens to him? The young Pierre Bakolapa is stabbed by the most drunken member of the group. His life is saved by a young woman who happened to be walking by on the arm of her boyfriend.

The big reveal at the end of the play is that the young man who takes Pierre Bakolapa to the emergency room is the son of the editor of the newspaper in Antwerp, where in 1978, when the story takes place, the great reporter Guy Petitjean, alias Tintin, still works. The paper's head honcho calls his employee, who just one week before had asked for the hand of his boss's daughter—it would be his second marriage—a daughter who is heir

to the empire that had made her father one of the most powerful men in Flanders. Panicking at the idea of losing his beautiful and oh-so-wealthy fiancée, but unable to rid himself of the boy whose face reminds him of his own deceased father, the aptly named Tintin does the unthinkable: He grabs a saber adorning the wall in his boss's office and takes his own life.

And that's how the two-hour-long play ended, with a standing ovation from the crowd clearly aligned with the author-director, a crowd of men and women of all colors, mostly young people.

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Our discussion after the performance gave me a better sense our sociologist friend's avowed hunger for argument. His whole battle plan—and the play we'd just seen was but one of its fronts—came down to the idea he kept hammering home whenever he spoke with "Dumont Jr." As he saw it, after convincing Africans and the other peoples they once dominated that it was in their best interest to give up their gods and their ways, Belgium and all of Europe had retreated back into their fortress.

Europe and Belgium had begun to build walls, he explained, to protect themselves from the Pierre Bakolapas arriving at their gates, labeled parasites by a welfare state choking on neoliberalism. Yet, argued our Jeff the African, so proud of his *ducks*' performance, "because those Pierre Bakolapas are the sons of Tintin, they remind us that they are only here because we were there. Because we saw it as our mission to prove, with the backing of Yahweh and Darwin, that their swarthy souls were damned, and to share the eternal magnificence of our Enlightenment. If that truth isn't enough to bring a self-centered Belgium back to its senses, then I have one last suggestion: that it finish what it started, by which I mean, hasten its own end with a collective suicide and dare the rest of the Judeo-Christian West to follow suit. Do we have any other choice? The colonial trap has got Tintin's country by the balls, do you see what I mean, Dumont Jr.? If the country freezes when confronted by those knocking at our door, that's the end of us. If we keep moving in the direction indicated by those loons—

those seemingly unrepentant fascists outside the theater—then we’re just getting a taste of the plague before we keel over.”

I was only half impressed by his play, so I let our friend know that while it might make a strong impression at first, as an African refugee waiting for a work visa in his country, I did not at all identify with the portrait he sketched of the young Pierre Bakolapa. “The reasons so many Congolese come to your door have absolutely nothing to do with the search for some pseudo-father, Jeff the African. I am not Tintin’s daughter—and I’ve never met even one of his sons among any of the Africans I know. I am my father’s daughter and no one can change that truth, which is far from a meaningless detail. I don’t claim to be an intellectual like you two professors, so please forgive me if this seems a bit brazen. But as I was watching the play, I wondered if the issue couldn’t have been laid out more simply. Humans must be able to go where they want, when they want, because that’s how things have been since *Australopithecus*, *Cro-Magnon*, or whatever kind of man there left his cave in Africa, Professor Funcken. It’s as simple as that, isn’t it? Just look at how unremarkable this all is when you get down to it: Germans go to China, by the hundreds, looking for happiness; Chinese go to Ethiopia, by the thousands, and get rich. So tell me why shouldn’t the Ethiopians go live in Australia or at the North Pole? That’s what you should show, in my opinion, instead of beating your head with a stick about those children of Tintin that no one has ever met at a border crossing. And while you’re at it, mister director, just admit that when the publisher of Antwerp’s newspaper forgets his lines three times in a row, that’s too much.”

He rewarded me with a kiss on the forehead and promised he’d take inspiration from my straightforward presentation of a reality that was too often “wrapped up in rhetoric; the message would be clearer if it were less convoluted, less focused on preaching to the choir.” For his part, Francis argued that he had nothing against the idea of inviting all Tintin’s children suffering in poverty in Congo or anywhere in the south to Belgium, but what he really wanted to know was what the welfare state would have to offer them, since it was down to its last bite of food. Pretty skimpy rations

for both the Belgians and their guests—since no one knew how many there were, from Nouakchott to Antananarivo, via Djibouti, dreaming of the promised land.

With one of those big laughs that always punctuated his most sarcastic points, the sociologist replied that, however perspicacious and honest his friend might be, hadn't he ever wondered why the French language, although quite rich, used the word *hôte* to mean both "host" and "guest"? Even worse, according to him, Francis hadn't understood that for their old continent, open borders were the solution and not the problem. "And the reason is quite simple," he explained. "Each night, in our bedrooms, a drama plays out alongside the suffering of a menopausal Europe, a drama that will certainly lead to the collapse of the workforce from the Atlantic to the Ural River, as we used to say. We aren't having enough children, and for that we will pay such a price that our leaders, panicked and with no place to run, are just burying their heads in the sand. A cost that immigration, which is the only possible way out in the foreseeable future, would help us to bear, unless we persist in willfully shutting our eyes. But look, the man who's talking is in his sixties and has had two kids in three marriages. You, you're in your mid-forties, and how many do you have, Dumont junior?"

I would've liked to point out gently that the African woman he was winking at had not landed in Belgium with the idea of repopulating a country in need. But Francis beat me to it, sweeping away with a wave of his hand a refrain he'd obviously heard once too often from his opponent. And he did so with all the more self-assurance because he was unaware that the woman he shared his life with had just received, only a few hours before the start of the play, the results of a pregnancy test she'd had done at a clinic in the city: She was six weeks pregnant.

[1.](#) Manioc bread.

[2.](#) A Kikongo term for an herbalist or spiritual healer.

News of the pregnancy hit Francis like a truck crashing into a brick wall, he confessed several days later. The day after the play, his girlfriend, Professor Nathalie Tielemans—whose name was often invoked by Jeff the African—had delivered the fateful news. Caught off guard and, frankly, responding badly, the ladies’ man, whom his colleagues had once nicknamed “the lone wolf of Brussels’s nights,” first tried to lay the blame on his partner. He was swiftly put in his place, told that since anyone with any common sense knew no contraception worked a hundred percent of the time, a law professor should understand the situation. Just hearing that reply, I knew I’d love Nathalie; if ever our paths crossed—despite the plans her man seemed to harbor and that Passy’s presence only barely constrained—we’d get along wonderfully. I wasn’t wrong, but it was another few months before we finally met.

Francis argued that although, for the first time in his life, he’d fallen for a woman who made him want to build a home, he still couldn’t see playing the role of a father. And he reminded her (she’d already heard the refrain dozens of times before) that he just didn’t have in him anything like the tenderness a father should show a child. As he’d tell me, trying to justify his refusal to step up in the months before the arrival of that little miracle whose picture I’ll show you when the time is right, it was crystal clear to him: Robert Dumont had been a coward swimming in a sea of money, unable to live up to his role as a father. Even if she held on to that story about the sacred act of transmission that Jeff the African was always going on about, what led her to believe that he would succeed where his father had so

horribly failed? What guarantee was there that he'd prove worthy of the child fate had sent? Was he, Francis Dumont, really up to the task?

When he finally spit out the suggestion of an abortion, Nathalie Tielemans rejected it out of hand. Later he'd admit that he'd have been surprised if she hadn't. He knew his partner was not the sort of woman to get pregnant on purpose to trap him; she was already thirty-eight, and while she'd long dreamed of becoming a mother—without ever finding a “real man, with a backbone and not just a bag of spermatozoa,” as she put it—she just wasn't the type to do such a thing. “Monsieur Dumont is incapable of both dealing with his past and facing his present? Doctor Francis thinks that recognizing his child would be a gift to the woman who was stupid enough to get hooked by a swaggering seducer who's full of himself? Lawyer Dupont can just disappear, go back to being a social butterfly with insatiable appetites, if that's what's written in his DNA. He'll leave behind him a woman who, to be sure, knows how to handle all the consequences, legal and otherwise. A woman who'll teach her child that no one is a prisoner of his genes, that life is a far richer adventure and not just an endless trial against the gods and their plots.” She laid that all out and then slammed the door on her way out of the office where they'd been trying to find some way to salvage their relationship.

He sought solace in solitude and jazz—his favorite music—then found the strength to call her and say he needed some time. He hoped to clear his mind of all the garbage weighing on him, preventing him from thinking clearly. Nathalie calmed down and apologized as well. She insisted that she in no way wanted to minimize the pain he'd been carrying since his brother's death or the trauma, still fresh these many years later, caused by his refusal to reconcile with a father who'd repeatedly asked for that. My friend's partner then urged him to speak with a well-respected psychologist, a man who'd been a real help to her after her mother's death. A psychologist—to put it very, very simply in our language—is a sort of doctor for the mind, someone to whom you confide your fears, your anguish, your trauma, your memories—in short, everything that keeps you from looking life straight in the eye and marching on ahead. And, thanks to their

understanding of the human soul, they offer advice on managing your pain and help you work through all the old baggage that's been poisoning your life.

It was when we were celebrating Congo's Independence Day—and I watched him drinking like a fish—that Francis finally talked to me about how hard it had been. He felt like he'd lost half of himself somewhere along the line, and that had cast a shadow over the wonderful relationship he'd built with his Nathalie—the only relationship in his life that had ever really mattered, he added, as if trying to convince himself it was true. They'd been together for exactly two years and three months, a new record for him. The law professor went so far as to admit this was the first time he hadn't cheated in a relationship. After hearing that, and in light of everything else I've already told you this evening, you can see why I had to ask why he was paying so much attention to me, despite what he said about his relationship and, especially, despite what he knew about Passy Yakembo.

My boyfriend's arrival put a stop to the conversation then and there.

The party was wild at KVS, the performance hall in the Flemish cultural center that sits along the quay in Brussels. Passy and I had run into them by chance, but we should've known that nothing could keep Jeff the African from being there when all the Congolese in Belgium got together for their annual celebration. When we'd first heard that the Dean Wendo Kolosoy, the father of our rumba, was going to put on the show that all his fans in the diaspora had been waiting for since his surprise return to the musical stage, Passy had thought about inviting him. But then he'd had second thoughts. "I love the African, Nyota, that's not the problem. If he's there and we run into him, so much the better. But the last thing I want is to spend the whole evening with a guy who just keeps on trying to get me to go along with his Black Power projects. What else is he gonna try when he finds out that in some Italian stadium a player from Ghana just got hit with the same insults I did back in Roi Baudouin? I'm a football player and my top priority now is

Manchester City. For the rest, there are guys taking care of it, do you see what I mean? I can give you names...”

What I heard was my man making excuses. Since the incident in Roi Baudouin, a number of journalists were casting him as the new face of the fight against racism in sports, while another faction, picking up on his “I’m not Mandela,” was more critical. They painted him as a rather talented player, no doubt, but lacking the courage or the intellectual heft necessary to wage a battle that needed more than outbursts from a hothead on artificial turf. Because I’d talked with him about so many different things, and because I knew what he read, I was betting there was another Passy Yakembo.

After his long confession, I asked Francis why Nathalie wasn’t there at the party, then grabbed the fifth bottle of beer the law professor had just downed in less than an hour. He was on a tear, his tongue loosened like only alcohol and despair can do. He’d already gone on at length about his painful family history, but that was nothing compared to the torments of a man backed into a corner by the unwanted pregnancy of the woman he loved, despite his own record as an unrepentant seducer.

As Passy was coming back with Jeff the African, I could see on my man’s face that he’d managed to parry the assaults of his fast-talking, sharp-witted admirer.

Shouting over the noise from the band, which was doing a sound check as the stage lights flashed, the sociologist declared that for Francis’s upcoming birthday, he’d spring for dinner for two at L’Apogée du Manioc, as long as Francis proved himself on the rumba floor that night, “maybe with some help from our beautiful Nyota.” He wished the woman who’d first introduced him to the star of the show was there, but his wife was spending the evening with her goddaughter, a teenager who was going through a crisis that had the psychologists baffled.

Passy whispered in my ear that he'd just gotten a call from his agent, who'd been contacted earlier that day by an Italian team. A club that'd been on his radar wanted to know if he'd look at an offer. Before I could ask him if it was as tempting as Manchester City, we heard Wendo Kolosoy's voice. That voice unlike any other, which I'd always associated with the vinyl discs you'd carted by the dozens from Mushenge to Kinshasa, coming out of the mouth of a legend I was seeing for the very first time, on a stage thousands of miles from Congo, where he'd been both lionized and hunted down but never forgotten.

The singer, for whom Jeff the African expressed an admiration bordering on idolatry, began to caress the mic, you know that move of his. Here's what we heard that night, as best I recall. I'm trying to get it right because I know how you love our Dean Wendo. Because there's nothing that puts such a smile on your face as when you hum tunes from that time long ago that Papa, Mama, and you always evoke with such heartfelt nostalgia.

*"Mbote Mputuville! Hello Brussels! You're all so beautiful tonight, ladies and gentlemen, did you know that? I'll open this concert that marks our reunion in the land of the *noko* with a song I wrote in 1958, when I was all of twenty-eight years old, after the success of 'Marie-Louise' and 'L'Opposition du missionnaire,' for the only woman I ever loved in my whole life. The only one who ever refused me. A woman who taught me that glory, praise to God, does not open all doors. She was beauty incarnate. When our paths crossed, she was caught in the claws of an egotistical mortal, a man so full of himself. But I lacked the courage to free her from that good-for-nothing who ended up abusing her. Sisters and brothers, I've spent my whole life trying to find out what happened to her. If she found love, if another was better able than I to nurture the stars that danced in her eyes even after melancholy had sought refuge there. People told me they'd seen her in Brazzaville, Lagos, Berlin, even here in Brussels. I went to each of those cities, I asked hairdressers, mailmen, homeless people...and always came up empty-handed. Tomorrow I'll be seventy years old and this is my second visit to Brussels. I've no proof that she's living in this charming city that lent a name and a heartbeat to my neighborhood in Kin, Matonge. But if*

you run into her, tell her that she left a gaping hole in Wendo's heart when she disappeared long ago. All it took was one missed date for all the women in the world to disappear, just like that, from one day to the next. Tell her that at the dawn of the Belgian Congo's independence, the bastard who terrorized her lost his life in one of the many misunderstandings on that day of great confusion.

“At five a.m. two losers showed up at his villa in Kalina. They showed that dirty bastard a paper signed by my older brother, who worked for him. They said, ‘Bwana, independence has come. Lumumba says “Congo for the Congolese.” Everything that belonged to the white man becomes the Black man's property on June 30, 1960. Party officials confirmed that includes the master's car, his dog, if he has one, as well as his mistress, if she's not too old and if her taker thinks she's suited for work during the day or at night. But you're a bachelor and you don't have a pet, so we'll just make do with your house and everything in it. Our brother here already did an inventory, we have all the papers. We'll give you fifteen minutes to get out, we have other more important things to take care of.’ He laughed and called them buffoons. Taking himself for Captain Haddock, they say he even shouted, ‘Ten thousand thundering typhoons!’ before hauling out some sort of subjunctive to explain what independence really meant for Africans. You can use the preterit, you can even throw in the future tense, but not some sort of subjunctive when there outside, Lumumba's last speech is selling like hotcakes. They lost patience. A liberated people is an impatient beast, and we were no exception to the rule, you get me? They lynched him. He died like a bastard. Fate doesn't offer bastards a naval officer's honorable death—whether he be Captain Haddock or just a captain—otherwise we'd know about it. I'm not saying this because he was white. Make no mistake about it, I'm saying it because he was the most cowardly of whites—although I've crossed paths in my life with Blacks far more cowardly than that poor *nyangalakata*.^[1] It's not melanin that makes you a *nyangalakata*, my sisters and brothers. You're a *nyangalakata* because of what's in your guts, where the light that lets you act like a man and not a savage beast goes to die—my apologies to our cousins the chimpanzees for the comparison. Have I

behaved like a shit? Of course I have! Truth be told, if you run into a woman who tells you that Wendo Kolosoy is a great guy, the next one will say he's the perfect example of a *nyangalakata*, the worst shit she's ever met on earth. Believe both of them, because each holds half the truth about the man who's talking to you. Now you've heard too much of a rant, too much verborrhea from this preacher in troubled waters—so come close and listen instead to the song I wrote for the one and only platonic love in my whole damned life. Don't be afraid—talent's not contagious. Just gather around the band, my friends, and let the party begin!”

“**T**he sacred fire of the ebony gods”—that's the stuff the father of our rumba is made of, according to Jeff the African. Francis, who was trying to cushion his fall into the abyss of uncertainty by downing beer after beer in one gulp, was walled up in a world of his own. Everyone wanted to talk to Passy, who was slaloming from one table to the next, posing for a picture here, shaking hands over there, and blowing me kisses before going to sign an autograph a bit farther away. His fans, so happy to have him there with them, kept shouting, “*Mwana mboka!*,” “Scots killer!,” “Team Yolo Sud never backs down!,” “DRC, *eloko ya makasi!*”^[2]

At center stage, Wendo was as brilliant as the sun of independence that rose on that morning of June 30, 1960, in his native Congo—he'd seen it all before becoming our living legend.

The Dean was getting older, but despite an unsure foot, a trembling hand, and the fatigue you could see on his face an hour into the show, let me tell you, the former prince of Léo's nights was still a virtuoso, still lived up to his fabulous reputation. His vocal cords did not betray him; they filled the walls of the theater with tremolos that would make Luciano Pavarotti nursing a cold go white with jealousy—if you want to accept the rather daring comparison made by our friend the sociologist, a true rumba aficionado. Luciano Pavarotti is a very important Italian musician, but his tenor voice, adored the world around, would probably leave you cold, since

you're the only one in the country who makes fun of the high notes of Wendo Kolosoy's eminent disciple Papa Wemba.

With his flat-top plaid cap firmly on his head, and a lustful twinkle in his eye as soon as a female fan came up for a picture or to stick a banknote on his forehead, the Dean worked the room, moving from one eclectic group to another, singing verses from each of his best-known hits as the guitar backed him up. I wasn't surprised to see Jeff the African's lips moving along, proof if any was needed that when he'd married our Pygmy sister in that most faraway corner of Congo, the Fleming had also married the soul of our whole country. Besides, didn't you tell us yourself that whoever marries a foreigner also marries the land that nourished the one who stole their heart?

In KVS, the die-hard rumba fans, most of them Congolese sapeurs, were dressed to the nines—on one side, members of the group Vaincre Vuitton et Mourir who'd come straight from Paris, on the other their female counterparts from London, who proclaimed their allegiance to a group called Pas Un Rencard Sans Versace, which means that those slaves of European fashion couldn't imagine eating or wiping their ass without first spending their last dime on designer clothes. Versace is an Italian brand that some of our stars of the rumba scene have transformed into an urban totem. But really, that's got nothing to do with our story. I should stop going off on tangents.

Just let me add that there were a few couples who'd come from the United States and Canada—easy to pick out because of their jeans and brand-new sneakers. I can't tell you how ashamed they felt, the poor guys, because for a sapeur who knows his business, walking into a ring of La Sape, like the hall where none other than Dean Wendo was performing, wearing jeans is just handing your rivals a whip for your own public beating.

—

After sketching a few dance steps in the arms of a woman who'd come to give him a kiss and thank him "for what you're doing for those who're being tossed aside in this country that's on its deathbed, even if it

doesn't know it, Monsieur Funcken," and then added, "*Tika Nzambe abakisela yo mikolo ebele*,"^[3] Jeff looked worried. Then I overheard this exchange between him and his friend.

"It's a little strange that the president of Rencontres Belgolaises just wished me a long life," he said to Francis.

"Why?"

"Because I had a weird dream last night."

"Hmm, hmm...I also had a weird dream two nights ago, probably weirder than yours, but come on, tell me!"

"In my dream I saw my Botswana father-in-law, a well-known witch doctor around Bikoro, someone both adored and feared by members of his tribe. He came to tell me how I would die."

"No way!"

"What's worse, what he told me isn't so farfetched. He told me I'd die stabbed by a nutjob in front of an ecstatic crowd. You've got to admit that sounds like how I'd go. Imagine the headline of *Le Soir* or *L'Humanité* in Paris: 'Jeff the African stabbed in the main hall of the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren. The suspect is a madman with ties to the Flemish nationalist movement Onze Aarde.' I think that'd be quite the way to go. What do you think, Dumont Jr.?"

"Your dream is a lot more sinister than mine."

"Tell me."

"I can't remember everything, but the scene still lingers in my mind. It's in some unknown country, somewhere in Africa. I'm bound hands and feet, surrounded by crying women, while others sing a mournful song. Suddenly a huge man appears—he's only got one leg and he's balancing on it as well as he can. He tells me he's ready to buy the bird that had been entrusted to me—he'll trade me for the little white guy and his puppy. Without waiting for an answer, he points at me with an arrow that the woman who seems to be in charge of the mourners handed him."

"Our friends Passy and Nyota will confirm that Africans didn't need Freud to tell them that the unconscious expresses itself freely while we sleep, but you still have to break the code. What I know is that for a lot of

groups of people, the Botswana most notably, celebrations in our dreams foreshadow dramas, while tears or funerals generally announce a happy event. The arrival of a child or finding a long-lost friend—something like that. Is there any chance Nathalie is pregnant, Dumont Jr.?”

“I told you I don’t want to have children. My girlfriend...My love—”

“Yes, Nathalie?”

“Nathalie is perfectly fine with this—there’s nothing strange about it in the twenty-first century.”

“What am I sticking my nose into? Forget I said anything, Dumont. But...are you okay? You seem to have had a bit more to drink than usual. We’re not going to switch roles, are we? You’re supposed to be the lock that stands between alcohol and the old dog that I am. If you go off the deep end, I’m toast, my friend!”

“No, things are bad, African.”

“That’s what I thought.”

“Nathalie...”

“Yes, Nathalie?”

“She’s in her eighth week and I just can’t be a papa...It wouldn’t make any sense. It just...this is not the right place.”

“It’s absolutely not the right place, you’re right. But you can count on me to give this my full attention. We’ll take the time to really talk it through.”

Jeff the African patted him on the shoulder, told him to have some fun because whenever things look like a problem, there’s always a solution, that “even Belgium ended up putting together something that looks like a government after three hundred days, you remember?” Then he turned to Passy, waved, and with a move that made the sixty-year-old look like a dashing young man full of self-confidence, asked me for a dance.

[1.](#) “Degenerate,” in the slang of Kinshasa.

[2.](#) “Quiet strength.”

3. “May the Lord grant you a long life.”

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As Dean Wendo bowed to the incessant demands of his adoring fans and started in on “Marie-Louise” for a second time, I could have followed my friend—to find out what he could do on the dance floor and also relive those sweet wild nights with my girlfriends in Les Boyz Vous Ta-Kin and Grand Libulu that had punctuated my last years in Kin la Belle.

Alas, my mind was elsewhere.

One part of my mind kept returning to what the Dean had said at the start of his show. A prelude to the singer’s homage to the woman he’d once loved, the Belle of Léo whisked away in the arms of a bwana—one of the hundreds that roamed the capital of the rumba. His description of what could have been, his regrets about that failed revolt, sent ripples across the years, like a sword thrust in the water, and brought back memories of my Ndoyi. She had also disappeared without a trace. We knew that before she’d gotten to Léo, where she’d crossed paths with “the king of masks,” she’d fallen in love with another Belgian—I’d tried in vain to locate one of his relatives who might have helped us to understand. Even though I didn’t yet see any connection between the fate of the muse who still haunted our old Wendo and that of our princess, the words that came out of the Dean’s mouth pushed me to confide in Jeff the African.

I dove right in, stopping him dead in his tracks and asking if he could help me find my aunt who’d arrived in Belgium in 1958, brought there by her employer—we’d heard nothing since. He was stunned when I explained that I was of royal blood and that the woman I was talking about was the daughter of Kena Kwete III, King of the Bakubas. I gave him a quick

summary of the research I'd done six months earlier with the help of my Flemish sister and her family—which is to say, not much. The story of my visit to Mark De Groof's sister, and especially the fact that each of the old woman's cats had been named after a town in the Belgian Congo, practically made him die laughing.

My sociologist friend said he'd be more than thrilled to help me, but quickly added that chances were slim that the man he thought about contacting for this sort of mission would have better luck than the genealogist who'd already tried to help me. Too much time had passed and the fact that we hadn't heard from her at all only complicated things more.

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As I poured out my heart, the professor started to tell me about the thousand and one hurdles he'd had to overcome to bring back to Belgium the woman he'd married in accordance with the customs and traditions of the Batswa and Congolese law. Then he mentioned those Congolese who'd arrived in Belgium during the colonial era, in circumstances he qualified as particularly troubling—people, he added, whose families were long unaware of their tragic ends. We made our way to the back of the room, far from the amplifiers that were piercing our eardrums. That's when he started to tell me about men and women the colonial power had gone to find in the most remote villages of our country more than a century ago, and who were brought to Belgium for a purpose they could hardly imagine.

The story began in 1897, when a team of Belgian doctors went to the colony in search of “savages”—specimens of the highest quality. They were looking for natives to display at the World's Fair being held in Tervuren, a short car ride from Brussels, where the Royal Museum for Central Africa is housed. After an expedition that lasted forty-five days, no fewer than 269 individuals had been dragged out of the “jungle”—as they called the far reaches of our forests. They were loaded onto a ship for Antwerp, where

they arrived after a crossing that lasted 120 days and cost the lives of a number of our compatriots.

Throughout the fair, those particular guests were expected to act out the elements of native life that their hosts wanted to show their visitors. They were displayed against a backdrop of huts built from grasses brought from Congo and planted along the edges of ponds around the park. I actually went there to see for myself, because at first the story seemed to have been dreamed up by a bad playwright with some obvious mental problems.

In the park in Tervuren, metal fences kept the guests from the hordes of visitors—and according to Jeff the African, more than eight million flocked to see the display in just six months. But they hadn't planned for the vagaries of weather in Belgium, something I've told you about before and that makes the kingdom one of the strangest places in Europe. It's not uncommon to experience all four seasons in just one day. The weather exposed the guests to influenza and pneumonia, illnesses not found in our climate; and the food they were subjected to was just as unfamiliar. One after the other, seven died right before the eyes of the organizers of this exhibition that I'd never heard about until the night of that unforgettable concert.

The bodies were rapidly buried in an unmarked grave in the woods. About a dozen years later, my friend explained, they were dug up and reburied in the courtyard of a Catholic church, Saint-Jean-l'Évangéliste. "Those seven blackened tombs lined up along a brick wall on rue de l'Église are the biggest African memorial in this country, Nyota. Of course, I hope you can find your aunt's trail. But even if this quest ends in failure, you and your boyfriend should go pay your respects to the memory of Sambo, Mpemba, Ngemba, and their companions in misfortune, Ekia, Nzau, Kitukwa, and Mibange. That's my advice to each child of Lumumba's Congo who sets foot in the former colonial power. Some follow my advice, whereas others, like that writer I met in the museum last summer, just tell me that their Africa is not behind them, but ahead—no doubt in a fantastical utopian future where everyone is able to receive the

Good Lord's blessing without confession. I can lead a horse to water, my friend, but as for making it drink..."

You can imagine how shaken I was by what I'd just heard, even if I had no idea of how closely intertwined the fate of those men and women evoked by the sociologist was with my Ndoyi's. A connection Francis would first discover several weeks later, thanks to the news of Nathalie's pregnancy—news that had spoiled a certain evening along the quays on June 30, 2004.

Still reeling, I told Jeff the African that I needed some fresh air—my emotions were threatening to knock me off my feet. Passy, who'd seen us heading off, stopped dancing and came to join me. I pulled myself together and told him everything I'd just learned. Without any hesitation, he announced we'd go to Tervuren the following Sunday, the day after the match between the Mauves and Standard de Liège.

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Passy and I came back into the hall where that timeless hit "Chérie Kabisa" was playing; the dance floor was packed. We looked for our two Belgian friends and my eyes landed on Francis, leaning against the wall, his hair all a mess, his shoulders hunched; he looked exhausted. Seeing us coming, he staggered in our direction. In a slurred voice he said, "Take my phone, my friends, and call Nath. Call her right away and tell her I won't play games with the fruits of love. Tell her that our child will live. He or she will live to see the beauty of the world reflected in the eyes of their shit of a father. Because there's nothing but beauty and pride in these eyes his mother has mistaken for sacks bloated with arrogance and vanity. Tell Nath my name isn't Robert Dumont, it's Phoenix. And I've decided to make my peace once and for all with all the nightmares of the house in Uccle. Tell the woman I love that Phoenix will rise from the ashes. Before she goes to bed, tell her, please—she needs to hear that."

As Passy hoisted him over his shoulder, I finally caught sight of the sociologist: bare-chested, dripping with sweat, surrounded by no fewer than four matrons, swathed in a pagne with the same pattern as the shirt he'd

chosen for our national holiday. While we were busy, Jeff the African had ascended through all the levels of the pantheon of our rumba and been fully consecrated. I swear, Grandpa, there in the heat of a night in Brussels, that sixtyish man with a frail silhouette had been transformed into a prince with silver locks who rivaled the great Wendo Kolosoy for the title of Sphinx of the African Dance Halls...much to the delight of those ladies, first and foremost our own Mamie Solution, who clearly had no intention of letting him sit one out. Yes, my guardian angel, who'd made her grand entrance just an hour earlier, was in her element. She loved nothing more than to *faire la nouba*, to live it up, and she happily told anyone who'd listen that "Whether you're a fierce virgin or a shameless hussy all too proud of her 'greatest common divisor,' you'll still end up dead and buried like Jezebel and Mary Magdalene. So here's my advice, fuck life and die drunk on sin, because God is Love!"

Then she tore the sociologist away from her rivals, spinning him around while delicately holding his left hand, then firmly wrapping an arm around his waist and pulling him tight to her pelvis. Unless I was hallucinating, I saw them give in to the madness as one, their mouths plastered tightly together, their lips offering curious eyes the image of a craving so intense it left little to the imagination. One thing was sure: There on the dance floor of the KVS, that wasn't the same old Professor Funcken I thought I knew.

As I watched the frenzied dancing of Mamie Solution and our Flemish friend, I discovered that the fever provoked by a woman's desire can transform an old college professor into a dance-floor god, giving him at once the flexibility of a feather, the lightheartedness of a bonze, and the endurance of a marathoner. With a sense of rhythm that defied all reason, the author of the play *Tintin's Testicles* performed pirouettes and shook his booty like a jungle vine whipping through the air; the leading man sixty-two years young arched his back to press against the "greatest common divisor" of a Mamie Solution drunk on alcohol and insouciance—quite a show for an audience that was well aware that neither of them were on the market for love.

Rumor had it that Mamie Solution's charisma was so strong it would castrate half the men who tried to get something going behind the Maestro's back; that meant Jeff the African had tapped into virility's dark side. The only explanation was that, back in the ancestral lands of precolonial Congo, at the very source of the rumba—that belly-button dance the Kongos invented long before Portuguese sailors arrived on their shores—the Fleming had appeared at the height of the storm and, taking advantage of the moment when Thunder and Guitars reach a mutual climax, stolen their sacred fire and raced back with it to his native Belgium. "I haven't let myself go like that since the wedding of an Ivorian friend in Bordeaux, two years ago," he blurted, his eyes ablaze. "Then my two buddies and I made the rounds of all the clubs in town before ending up at the ruins of the Palais Gallien, drunk, naked, and dead broke." There was no reason to doubt him on that.

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We finally set sail, leaving the party a bit after four a.m. When I woke up after that first night—or rather, the first half night—in Passy’s beautiful apartment in Auderghem, I realized my boyfriend had gone off to the bathroom. But before doing so, he’d set a tray on the little bedside table with a glass of orange juice, a still-steaming-hot cup of coffee, waffles, maple butter, and a bunch of grapes, all for me. His phone was lying on the bed, on the side where he’d fallen asleep only a few hours before.

The phone began to vibrate.

And that’s when—as the word “Belga” appeared on the screen—I made my split-second decision. Belga is the name of the Belgian press agency, in other words, the main source of news leads for papers across the country, whether about plans for a royal visit or the arrest of a criminal sought by the federal police.

At the party the night before, I heard Mamie Solution ask Passy between dances why he didn’t speak out more openly about the insults shouted at Roi Baudouin Stadium. She didn’t understand why he was avoiding the question, speaking in vague terms, “giving answers like you’re Chinese. No, really, just what language do you speak, champ? You’re letting me down!” My guardian angel said that after another incident had been reported in Brabant, in the French-speaking part of the country, she’d expected more from the *Mwana mboka*; she was playing on his patriotic pride.

What you need to understand is that the scenario that played out during the match between the Mauves and the Scotsmen of Glasgow Celtic was

nothing new. It had happened first in the city of Milan, in Italy, then in a youth championship game near the town of Wavre, in Wallonie. A young player from Cameroon, only sixteen, had also been treated to monkey howls after scoring the tying goal for his team. When he wanted to protest and threw one of his shoes into the stands, the referee gave *him* a red card, which led to blows between the adolescent and the man in black. All hell broke loose. Five people were wounded, one seriously, and there was significant damage to the stadium, too. Several papers reported on the incident. One journalist asked the minister of youth and sports if the national authorities should be worried about a new trend.

I answered the phone.

I introduced myself to the journalist as the press attaché for the star player of the Anderlecht club, “who, for the moment, doesn’t want to speak about the incident at the under-18 championship in Wallonie. I have, however, been directed by Passy Yakembo to give your agency a message that he hopes will put an end to the speculations.”

Yes, in the time it took my man to finish his shower and come back to the bedroom, the madwoman I am had managed to have him make a statement that would appear in all the newspapers starting the next day: He condemned in the strongest of terms the ignoble acts that took place at Roi Baudouin Stadium and in Wallonie. He’d written a manifesto against racism in football, “the Heysel Manifesto.” Within a week it would be cosigned by a group of some thirty world-class players from Europe’s grand championship teams, athletes of diverse origins who’d expressed their solidarity with him since the match against Glasgow Celtic. A manifesto is a declaration formulated by a public figure, usually to call public attention to a question of great importance. For example, here at home, the violence to which abandoned children are subjected in the city’s streets and markets could be addressed in a manifesto signed by our local stars, but I suppose they have other things on their plates, or perhaps they simply don’t think it’s the best way to get the attention of the Congolese people.

Just when the journalist, thrilled by the scoop she thought was hers and hers alone, asked me for the names of those big football stars who’d be

signing the manifesto, the door of the bathroom creaked. I hung up quickly, discreetly slipped the phone under the sheets, and went to my boyfriend, like the well-mannered girl I should have been.

The die was cast.

I'd soon find out if the boy from Yolo Sud, who was afraid of burning his bridges to the Holy Grail of European football, would be able to stay afloat in the tumultuous waters into which I had so brutally thrown him, in a suicidal gesture I never would have imagined carrying out.

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Francis, for his part, was going through some dark days, torn between his love for Nathalie, the woman he didn't want to lose, and the demons of his childhood, which refused to let go of him. His Flemish friend tried to show him the way forward—no surprise there—as did the psychologist his girlfriend had recommended, although he was clearly not comfortable admitting he'd gone to see the specialist in question. He finally let himself be convinced or, to be more precise, came to terms with it. He was responsible for a pregnancy that was then in its ninth week. Rather than running away from what could be the happiest moment in his life, he could take stock of himself, begin the process of introspection he'd avoided for so long, and prepare to embrace his role as father wholeheartedly.

When he invited Professor Nathalie Tielemans to L'Horloge du Sud, L'Apogée du Manioc's rival restaurant in Matonge, near the Gare du Luxembourg, Francis was at peace. But he didn't want to just dive into the conversation. To break the ice and give himself time to get his thoughts in order, he brought up the debate she'd organized with the law students from her class on human rights. A debate, to put it simply, is a competition where future lawyers battle it out using all the techniques employed by real lawyers before an audience and judges, usually their professors.

In the end, according to what Francis told me, a Congolese student was set to debate her Belgian colleague on a theme sure to make you smile—and that's why I want to include this detail in my story: Were they “for or

against the government ending the policy of secrecy and declassifying files in the national archives to shed light on the assassination of Patrice Lumumba in January 1961?” Because the woman from Congo had won hand’s down, after passionately defending the position “against,” Francis, who’d attended the debate, asked his partner if there was some reason, other than the purely abstract side of the game, why the winner had chosen to argue against the interests of her home country?

The explanation he was given, which the student had shared with Nathalie, in confidence, and which will make you smile even more, was that she is the granddaughter of one of the fathers of our independence who’d played a central role in the assassination of your hero. The granddaughter, who shared a patronym with her brothers and sisters that was synonymous with infamy and betrayal, held that time had done its work; basic common sense insisted that the victims and torturers of that long-closed episode from the past should be left shut away in history’s closets. That was the only way, she insisted, that the Belgians and the Congolese, whose biological families sometimes harbored both a Karen Van Musala and a Nzey Verwilghen, could come together, joining hearts and minds to build a common future, because ever since the Portuguese explorer Diogo Cão sailed into the mouth of the Congo River, history had entwined their fates. The debater, whose hair fell in long braids down her back, was rewarded with a standing ovation of the sort normally reserved for movie stars, as well as by raised middle fingers and jeers from the Black and Arab fringes of the crowd, a hostility Francis said he understood.

I don’t for a second doubt that you, listening silently to me now, have already figured out the identity of her grandfather—that infamous traitor peacefully living out his days on a farm near the mining town of Kolwezi in Katanga. His name and the role he played are better fixed in our collective memory than his descendants imagine.

I’ll spare you the beautiful and edifying discussion that my friend, his partner, Jeff the African, and I had a few weeks later about the argument laid out by the granddaughter of one of Lumumba’s torturers—after we’d uncovered the full story about what had happened to the princess. What you

need to know at this point, when the clock on the wall tells us it's nine thirty in the evening, is that Francis succeeded in making a connection between the weighty family inheritance of the woman who'd won the debate and his relationship to his own father's memory.

Please, if you're tired of my monologue and want to rest before Papa and Mama return, just move your leg a little and "Voice of Congo" will immediately stop its programming for the evening. We're not in any rush here.

But back to my friend. He clasped his partner's hands, stared deeply into her eyes, and shared what he'd been thinking about the last week. "My love, I am not my father. I am the son who let arrogance and rancor build a prison around me, a wall I'm now ready to tear down. And what more eloquent way to do so than by turning my back on the past and embracing a child born of a love that, for almost two years, many have envied."

He spoke without taking into account the lucidity of the woman before him, who loved him and knew that, despite all he'd said, all that his conscience dictated, he was still quite far from finding the path that would lead him back to himself. Nathalie replied that while she was thrilled by the professor-cum-lawyer's impressive leap forward, he needed to go about it the right way. "You can't tear down the walls of the prison you built without first undermining its foundation, my dear. You have to make peace with your father's memory, forgive him for what you blamed on him, rightly or wrongly, and ask his forgiveness for that cardinal sin you've finally had the wisdom to name." Words that echoed my advice to him—when he wasn't ready to hear it—the night of the party at the Flemish cultural center when Dean Wendo Kolosoy had taken us back to the rumba of your youthful days.

My friend later confessed that he'd left the Senegalese restaurant feeling awful. If he heard the truth in Nathalie's words, he had no idea where to

begin the quest she was sending him on, no idea what he might find at the end of his downward slope, and no confidence at all that he had the strength to carry it out. One thing, however, was perfectly clear: He knew he could not turn his back on their unborn child. Ultimately, that was the key to it all, unlocking the story of what happened to my Nyodi, bringing her out of the darkness and into the light, where she can shine like a star in the blackest night.

The day after that dinner where his big declaration was not met with the enthusiasm he'd hoped for from his beloved, Francis got a call from his sister. Bénédicte told him that his six-year-old niece Kim, whom he adored, was hoping he and Nathalie would join her at a party for Guido, his deceased father's friend, who was celebrating his ninety-fourth birthday at his home in Laethem-Saint-Martin, near the town of Gand. The little girl was going to play a song on the piano that she'd written for the elderly gentleman, her mother's godfather.

That phone call set everything in motion.

Francis thought that if anyone could help him to go back in time and vanquish his old demons, it was his father's one true confidant—the family was sure he'd shared all his secrets with him. Francis asked about the health of the former commissioner-general of Expo 58. His sister told him that money did have the advantage of letting one age with dignity. “You can imagine he doesn't have much time left, but besides some memory lapses and a few booboos you expect in someone his age, Guido is holding up quite well. It goes without saying that your presence at his birthday would be the best gift of all. Every time we talk, he asks about the one he calls ‘our great business lawyer.’ ”

My friend decided to go to Laethem-Saint-Martin, in East Flanders.

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While the professor-cum-lawyer chased after his childhood ghosts, your granddaughter was reaping the consequences of the audacious

act she'd committed one Sunday morning in a fancy apartment on rue de la Chasse Royale in Auderghem.

"You are completely out of your mind, Nyota!" my Flemish sister cried when I told her about the act I'd put on for the Belga journalist. According to Ine Vandermaelen, whether Passy Yakembo was a lovesick puppy or cocky smooth talker, he'd never forgive my brazenness, since what was at stake was his football career. When I turned for advice to Mamie Solution, she had an entirely different reaction—no surprise, really, for anyone who knew her. "I'll buy you a bottle of champagne, my dear! Veuve Clicquot, nothing less. Passy told us we should expect the unexpected from a wild beast from Yolo Sud. You grew up there, too, so you've proven him right. You dribbled right past the last defender, now it's up to him to score the goal that all Belgium has been waiting for. That insult's been lingering too long. Let him wash it away so we can put it behind us. He's not Mandela—that's what he said on the television, right? Well, you're going to make him bigger than Madiba and Lumumba together. *Naloba naloba te!* Tomorrow your statement will be all over the media, and it'll be up to the champion to come out of the woods and show us just what he means when he keeps talking about Yolo Sud."

He called me.

I caught my breath before I answered.

"Passy, it's me. Listen—"

"Shhh! You wanted to find out if I knew how to swim? If I had balls? If I could transform your slap on the cheek into a caress? Well, turn on the TV and then come celebrate the big news with me."

"The big news?"

"Turn on the TV, you crazy girl!"

"Calm down, Passy—"

"So just what does your name mean, Nyota? What did you tell me?"

"The star of whom the river asks its way."

"Okay, the star. I admit it took me a while, but I saw it, I saw the damned path. Turn on the TV!"

What I saw on the screen was an entirely different Passy Yakembo. The interview had been filmed the night before. He confirmed the information given by his “new press attaché.” The manifesto was ready and would be circulated in the next forty-eight hours. In just the last day, he’d been contacted by ten other football stars who were joining him in speaking out against racism in sports. He cited the French players Lilian Thuram, Zinedine Zidane, Christophe Dugarry, and Thierry Henry. And then Cristiano Ronaldo, from Portugal, and the English players Ashley Cole and David Beckham, as well as the Cameroonian Samuel Eto’o, the Ivorian Didier Drogba, and the Italian Alessandro Del Piero. Arsène Wenger, the trainer of the British team Arsenal, had also spoken up.

He announced that Belgian public figures from all fields had joined the players, “first among them, Professor Jeff Funcken, who needs no introduction, the man who introduced me and the woman I love to the most important African memorial in Belgium, on rue de l’Église in Tervuren. That symbolic place is a reminder to all of us who live in this country, which is the true heart of Europe, that if we can’t change what disgusts us when we look in history’s rearview mirror, we can and we must take action so that never again does the train of our dreams for humanity send us hurtling along the rails of madness.”

I was watching Passy Yakembo, but I was hearing Aimé Césaire, the great Martinican poet whose masterpiece *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* I’d just introduced him to—I’m only slightly exaggerating. While waiting to see how the authorities would handle the problem, now that it’d been clearly identified, the forty-eight signatories of the Heysel Manifesto were taking a solemn oath, he added: Each and every time an athlete was attacked in a stadium for the color of his skin and the referee failed to temporarily suspend play, they would immediately leave the pitch, regardless of the consequences and the level of competition.

When he opened his apartment door for me at the end of that day, an enormous bouquet of flowers in one hand and a bottle of champagne in the other, he had even bigger news: Since his media debut had been picked up by the British press, as well as by news outlets across Europe, he’d gotten a

phone call from none other than the trainer of the Manchester City team. The club was in the middle of a big rebuilding phase. A new generation was on its way, full of young talent, but they needed a leader to carry the torch, both on the field and in the locker room. The trainer thought that the young man who'd just laid down a challenge to the Union of European Football Associations to address a problem that was of growing concern for football officials around the world was precisely what the team needed. He let him know that meant a clear path to the championship in the land of Queen Elizabeth. All Passy had to do was say the word and it was in the bag.

Because I'm crazy but not immodest, I won't tell you, even under torture, just how the most brazen of press attachés in all of Belgian football spent the night, wrapped in her victim's sheets. Just know that six months later, on a beach in the seaside town of Knokke, deserted by swimmers, with only the last rays of the setting sun and a lonely lifeguard for witnesses, the boy from Yolo Sud offered me the diamond ring I'm wearing on my left hand. For two days I cried tears of joy at the idea of becoming Madame Yakembo, then I almost died laughing when Mamie Solution offered me the trade of the century: I could sell my precious gift and buy "at a discount, for a dear friend," her old Mercedes-Benz that spit out as much smoke as all the factories in Belgium put together.

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Let's get back to Francis.

He'd arrived at Laethem-Saint-Martin, along with his sister and her daughters, as the clock struck eight in the evening. In the big house where Francis was setting foot for the first time, the party had been over for an hour. Guido Martens De Neuberg, weakened by age but still in control of his faculties, had been moved to tears when he saw his friend's son step across the threshold of the vestibule where he was waiting for his guests, a cup of herbal tea in hand.

During the trip from Brussels, what had begun in my friend's mind as a tentative plan had turned into determination. It was time for him to turn

back the clock—for years his sister had been pushing him to do it, but he'd always maintained it would do no good. Later he'd admit that he'd thought about my advice, as well as that of his friend, who'd finally shifted from knee-jerk antagonism to friendly empathy and a desire to help. Alone in his car, the words Nathalie had uttered in the restaurant L'Horloge du Sud returned like a refrain: "I got the first ultrasound images. If ever you want to see them, whether to know if we're having a boy or a girl or just out of curiosity..."

Once Martens's three children had left, and Bénédicte and her two little girls retired to their room, Francis and Guido Martens De Neuberg shut themselves up in the old man's library, which my friend would later describe as a gallery filled with all sorts of artifacts, mainly masks and figurines from Africa.

Guido thanked his deceased friend's son for coming to see him, stressing that he was aware of what it cost him to do so. He congratulated him on having finally found that "rare pearl" in his colleague Nathalie Tielemans, and then confessed just how happy that made him because—and here's the gist of what he said—"with love comes children. And a parent can refuse children anything, including a share of their inheritance but, please listen to what this old judge has to say: They can't refuse to pass on the story that connects them to their family tree."

He then told him about his own childhood, the feelings he'd harbored his whole life for his deceased father who'd turned his back on him when he was just a babe, barely able to stand on his own two feet. After that came the story of his extraordinary life, both his successes and his failures, what he'd learned, what he regretted, what he was really proud of—and his three children were at the top of that list, followed by the famous Roman De Neuberg art galleries that his younger son managed in London. He told him about how he'd met Robert Dumont in Liège, where his own mother had gone to live with her second husband after his father had fled to New York.

Francis was still waiting for him to get to the most important part—namely his memories of his friend Robert, who'd shared so much of his adult life with him until death tore them apart—when Guido suddenly broke

off and retreated behind a wall of silence, a silence that lasted several long minutes. Then he opened a gray envelope and took out a key that he slipped into his visitor's hand, before sitting back down in his rocking chair.

“Hold on carefully to the key I’ve just given you,” he said. “I was entrusted with giving it to you on the day when I could utter the name of bow-tied banker without you pouncing on me like a cat. It’s the key to a safe-deposit box in the Fortis bank in Brussels. Your father left a small cedar box there for you. Once you’ve seen what all is inside, come back to see me—if it’s not too much to ask you to make a second trip for an old wreck who spends his days afloat on an ocean of memories. I’m certain you’ll want some explanations. But if no questions come to mind, I’ll just tell you about the most beautiful, the most heart-wrenching adventure your father and I shared in our sixty years of devoted friendship: the Brussels World’s Fair in 1958.”

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Francis waited a week before going to the Fortis bank on rue Montagne du Parc. Less than twenty minutes after walking through the door, he emerged from the immense structure where his father had, in another life, made his fortune, bearing the treasure that explains his presence by my side here at the foot of your bed, far from his university, far from his Nathalie, far from little Célia Dumont who, as I speak to you now, must be wondering where her papa has gone.

He waited for nightfall to bring a sense of calm to his apartment on the rue des Courlis in Watermael-Boitsfort before finding out what was inside the box, which was sealed with a pale pink Band-Aid inscribed with his initials: F.D. Inside was a notebook, some thirty pages filled with his father's handwriting; he recognized that very regular script immediately. And then, carefully wrapped in parchment, an object that sent shivers through him as soon as he saw it: a black necklace with an ivory pendant he thought he recognized. Although it was a woman's bust, the sculpture recalled another, a man's bust, carved from the same material.

Where had he seen it?

It looked so familiar, but he couldn't quite put his finger on where it could have been. He was hesitating between an art opening he'd attended a few weeks earlier in Antwerp and an object that might have caught his attention when he and Nathalie had last visited the Musée de l'Homme in Paris.

My friend wrapped the necklace back up in its packaging and dove into the notebook. It opened with the following words, which I will read to you, because Francis let me copy them down. I've translated them into our

language so that you can fully grasp the exact circumstances that led to the disappearance of your daughter, my Ndoyi, the princess Tshala Nyota Moelo:

Francis, my beloved son. From where I now lie, I am happy to know that your eyes are finally reading these lines. Happy that you want to turn back the clock and learn things you could've learned much earlier if I hadn't failed so miserably at maintaining our beautiful relationship—our love of cycling and fresh air that had long brought us together. First, let me tell you that the notebook in your hand isn't thick enough to contain all the words I could use to express my affection for you, or the great pride I felt, year after year, following each of your accomplishments, as well as those of your sister. Although nothing could fill the unbearable void left in my heart after Sebastian's disappearance, Bénédicte and you succeeded in making the rest of my days less painful...

What followed was a mass of information that would send his son on a roller coaster of emotions, page after page. It had been written between August and December 1989, the year before his death. Dumont Sr. went on at great length about what he felt when he lost his youngest child, Sébastien, and how that ordeal changed his life. Francis learned, among other things, that his deceased father had bequeathed part of his immense fortune to research to end Down syndrome, the disorder from which Sébastien suffered. But well before that, as soon as they'd gotten the diagnosis and unbeknownst to his family, the banker had become one of the principal benefactors of two large research projects on the disorder. One was spearheaded by a center at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, in the United States, while the other was affiliated with an institute at the University of Ghent, in Belgium. This information, of which my friend had had no inkling, revealed a side of the deceased that was totally opposed to the image of the financial shark he had detested for so long.

His father revisited several episodes from his youth, including his relationship to his own father whose only bequest to him was a love of work, of duty to the collective, of loyalty and fidelity in friendship. He evoked his love for the only woman in his life, the mother of his children, whom he refused to replace when she preceded him to the grave. He reflected at length on how he'd met Guido and what made that Fleming the brother his parents hadn't given him. He wanted to share many other things that were close to his heart, but he'd just been diagnosed with brain cancer and knew that his days were numbered. His final wish—which explained his epistolary project—was that, sooner or later, the child who'd turned his back on him would really know whose son he was.

The real shock for my friend came with the words his deceased father used to close his long letter, after pleading with him to accept his part of the inheritance. His father recalled an episode related to the World's Fair of 1958, which he described as the most exhilarating and also the most painful of his life: the "village" where a dozen Blacks were displayed, representing various ethnic groups from the Belgian Congo. He went on at length about the "devastating encounter" he had in Heysel Park. Now I'm going to read you another two pages from the notebook:

Those men and women were displayed in the park, exposed to the stares and jeers of crowds of onlookers; in other words, as creatures meant to feed our curiosity about savages. They allowed us once again to justify the colonial enterprise as a path to progress, in case our compatriots had any doubts about the benevolence of our civilizing mission in Central Africa. I wouldn't have gotten involved if I hadn't believed that there was nothing immoral in this, even if in retrospect there were many things I should have done differently. As I write these lines, in the humidity of night in the Ardennes, the memories are still quite fresh in my mind, but it was another era, another world, my dear Francis. Yet even if that is the truth, I must confess that from the first day I looked into the eyes of one of those Africans, I saw the true color of the most widely accepted lie of my

times. Since no one can lie to their own conscience, a weighty doubt took root in my mind. A doubt that was transformed into unease, and finally revolt. Revolt against myself, clearly, because I hadn't been able to make my committee hear the little voice that, since the start, kept insisting we weren't just making little mistakes but committing a mortal sin.

When I had to accompany to the emergency room the young woman, only nineteen years old, who'd had the courage to ask her companions to leave Heysel in protest against the treatment we'd reserved for them, I already had a sense that the foundation of my values was going to suffer a serious blow. Quite simply, I'd reached a turning point in my life as a Christian, as a man. I'd have done anything, my dear Francis, to save that poor woman's life. I stayed by her bedside for two days. I wanted to know who she was. Struggling courageously against death, she told of the long and painful path that had led her from Kasai, in the former Belgian Congo, to Heysel Park. If I were to tell you everything, it would take more than five notebooks like this one. If her story interests you, talk to my friend Guido—he knows it almost as well as I do.

What I'd like you to know on the day you are first reading this missive, is that when she felt her forces abandoning her, that young woman entrusted me with the object you must have already seen beside the notebook, wrapped in parchment. That object is of unimaginable value for her family back in Africa. I didn't fully understand everything it symbolizes, but that doesn't really matter. She made me promise to do the impossible and return it to her family as soon as I could. On the wrapping you'll see her father's name and that of the town where he lives, if he is even still alive as I write these words. I promised Tshala two things: First, I would use all means at my disposal to carry out her last wishes; and then, if she did leave this world, I'd offer her a burial worthy of her memory, even if I had to fight the administration for the right to bury her in our family crypt.

As for my first promise, starting in 1962, right after Congo's independence, and despite the troubles that ensued from the assassination of Patrice Lumumba, I used my contacts in our embassy in Léopoldville and among the Belgian religious congregations that had chosen to stay in place. Either those people took me for a troublemaker, who wanted to make them waste time looking for a needle in a haystack, or they really tried but failed to locate the mysterious addressee.

Two years ago, to mark the thirtieth anniversary of Tshala's death, after the thousand and one twists and turns in my long-standing struggle against the municipal authorities and their administration, which seems mired in an earlier century, I succeeded in doing the impossible. I had her remains disinterred from the park in Osseghem, where she lay at the foot of an old oak, in utter anonymity. I welcomed her into our family crypt in the cemetery in Laeken. That was an important step for me. I was proud to achieve that small miracle. What remained, then and now, is to find the person to whom the necklace belongs: either her father or one of her relatives...

My friend also let me know that his father hadn't wanted to entrust this duty to his sister, who was totally unaware of the story—she was only two in 1958. According to his own words, only a Dumont man could make amends for and repair what the father had broken. He begged his son to dedicate himself to this mission that he could now only hope to fulfill posthumously, provided Francis was willing to forgive him for his failings, too many in his life to list, but for which he was ready to assume the consequences. What he wanted Francis to do, as you've certainly understood, was find the father of that young woman. Meeting her in the spring of 1958 had devastated him; he'd never spoken about her to his children, but he still owed her a weighty debt.

What he had to do was find you.

Whether he just has a bad memory or because the Spirit of the Wild Parrot, protector of the sacred necklace, wanted it so, the man now asleep at your feet still hadn't made the connection between what he had in front of his eyes and the necklace he'd seen me wear at least twice, despite the questions he'd asked me about the symbols of my ancestral identity.

Francis was finally able to stitch the truth together after he returned to Laethem-Saint-Martin and asked Guido about this Tshala who was buried alongside his relatives in the family crypt. A detail that had been omitted from the letter let him see what was right there in front of his eyes, but that he hadn't been able to identify, not in the home of his friend, Jeff the African, nor in his apartment where, under the light of his bedside lamp, he'd gazed at the necklace that his father had placed in the cedar box.

Hearing Guido explain that the woman his father was talking about was named Tshala Nyota Moelo and that she was "beyond a doubt a princess from the Kuba Kingdom in the province of Kasai in the former Belgian Congo," my friend was dumbstruck. His heart leapt, he later confided to me. He felt the ground giving way beneath him. He opened his mouth but was unable to make the slightest sound.

He had just remembered that in the French restaurant he'd taken me to before the opening of Jeff the African's play, which Passy hadn't been able to attend, I'd introduced myself as a Kuba princess. He finally recalled that I was wearing a necklace almost identical to the one he needed to return to a great African chief or to someone in his family.

Unsettled by the turn things were taking, he gave in to the emotions welling up within him and told Guido, who was suffering from a bad flu, about how we'd met, an incident that, according to him, "had all the signs of a paranormal encounter." He also confided about the situation he was in since Nathalie had told him about her pregnancy. His father's friend congratulated him on the upcoming birth and for how far he'd come already along the path he'd chosen. The old man then echoed the advice he'd gotten

from Nathalie, Jeff the African, and myself. He urged him to forgive his father for the misdeeds he blamed him for, and also to forgive himself for the damage done by his ignorance and arrogance, both to himself and to those around him. Finally, he should prepare his heart to welcome Robert Dumont's grandson or granddaughter.

As for my role in the story, once the first shock of disbelief had passed, Guido declared that life had taught him that one was often better served by chance than by intentions; behind every curtain there was a trapdoor you needed to open without asking too many questions. When Francis told me this, I had to admit that despite whatever might lurk in the dark corners of his soul, the old Fleming was not without wisdom.

As soon as Guido finished speaking, my friend took his host in his arms and hugged him tight—with no concern for catching the flu. After helping him to sit back down and to readjust his hearing aid, Francis told Guido he'd go pay his respects at his father's tomb. And that when he did, he'd promise to do everything he could to honor the last wishes of Princess Tshala.

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At first, Guido was left speechless by my friend's promise. But once he started talking again, the old man opened up about many more things than he'd mentioned in their previous meeting. Guido told him that he'd had to cross the Atlantic Ocean in 1968, just before Richard Nixon was elected president of the United States, to be at the bedside of his father, with whom he'd had absolutely no contact during his life. His father had lost his whole fortune on the stock exchange and then drowned himself in alcohol after his second wife left him. The stock exchange, to explain it simply in our language, is a big market where companies like Unilever (the company to which the state ceded half of our sacred forests at the start of the 1970s) sell small bits of themselves to people who want to make a profit without ever working up a sweat. When the news reached Belgium, Léo Martens

was one of the many homeless people living in a Salvation Army shelter in Manhattan, part of the largest city in the USA.

Although his father rejected his offer to share a hotel room, even for a few nights, and categorically refused to come back to Belgium, where Guido pledged to help him get back on his feet, the former commissioner told my friend that those five days were the most precious of his life “because what really mattered, my dear Francis, was that I’d had the courage to make the trip. I needed to respect the fact that a man who’d lost the will to live along with his empire wanted to save face.”

The former commissioner-general of Expo 58 then gave Francis one additional bit of information about the circumstances surrounding my Ndoyi’s departure from Léopoldville. He confided that the reason for her presence in Heysel Park had something to do with a certain Mark, his business associate who was then living in the Belgian Congo. The man sought to settle a score with one of his friends who’d fallen for the princess, a certain René Comhaire. He’d contacted the committee through a connection in the Ministry of the Colonies and offered the services of the woman, who was part of his household staff. According to Guido, Mark made no mention of the fact that this unusual recruit was pregnant with his child, nor that it wasn’t, shall we say, the result of a respectful relationship. The princess would later reveal the whole story to his father during her short stay in the intensive care unit of Brugmann Hospital in Brussels.

Francis wanted to know what had happened to Mark and if he could perhaps meet him. He learned that he’d lost his life in Congo in shady circumstances—in line with those evoked by Dean Wendo the night of the concert in Brussels, when he spoke so movingly of the memory of one of his muses in Léopoldville. As for our princess’s former boyfriend, Guido had tried to find his trail both before and after independence, but with no luck. He’d heard he was in Mons in Belgium, or in Rouen in France. Each time the trail had led to someone with the same name but who’d never set foot in Central Africa.

Francis recalled the confusion on Guido’s face when he reached this part of his remembrance. He stared off at a rainbow over the immense

garden that spread out before them, but behind his gold-framed glasses, his eyes clouded over once more. My friend expected to see two tears run down the old Fleming's pinkish cheeks, but Guido just shook his head, then smiled woefully and continued to stare at the blue-tinged sky and the final rays of the setting sun, still splendid but growing ever paler.

"Do you know what the worst thing about this is, my dear Francis?"

"No doubt to discover that, in the end, men of good heart are not immune to the incalculable stupidity that flourishes in their time," my friend replied.

"Yes, there's that, too. You're right. Of course, that is quite true."

"You had something else in mind?" he said, nudging him to continue.

"I could talk to you about all those of my generation, starting with my own wife, who each lost a relative in Congo, someone near and dear who was carried away by malaria or assassinated by Simba rebels who proclaimed their support for Patrice Lumumba. All those people, and I insist, my dear wife among them, maintained that we were even with the Congolese, that we had their blood on our hands just as they had ours, and that we needed to put the past behind us and start fresh. But, my dear Francis, deciding which came first, the Congolese egg or the Belgian chicken, will not bring the Belgian Congo back. So let me tell you instead about one of my grandsons who wasn't with us the evening of my birthday. He's sixteen and plays football—he's crazy about it. Maybe he'll end up playing for the Diables Rouges, our national team. His idol, get ready, is none other than the center forward for Anderlecht, you know, the Congolese player who does that funny dance after each goal, that charming boy so many in this country dream of having as a son-in-law. Well, what happened to that little kid is so sad, I'm sure you heard about it. During a junior championship match, one of his teammates, who happens to be his best friend, a guy from Cameroon, was treated to monkey howls after he scored a goal. You know, that's too much for an adolescent to bear. Our young scorer lost it, he flipped off the jeerers in the stands and then lit into the referee who'd just given him a red card for an unsportsmanlike gesture or something like that. The man in black, about ten years older, beat the kid up

good. That's when my little devil got involved, trying to help his friend who had every reason in the world to rebel. And you know what? He ended up with a broken nose. But it's not the blows that he and his African friend got on the football field that keep me from sleeping at night, my dear Francis. It's knowing that the good guy from Cameroon wanted to leave the pitch to protest the same cries that your father and I heard around the lamentable 'Congolese village' in Heysel Park forty-six years ago. And that's what I just can't bear. I don't know what else to say."

That's how the conversation went between Francis and his deceased father's old friend. As they said farewell, before Francis headed back to Brussels in the middle of the night, Guido offered him a souvenir, a Tchokwe mask that I later admired in the entrance of the house on rue du Zéphyr, in Woluwe-Saint-Lambert. Then the elderly man encouraged him to invite me along when he visited the cemetery at Laeken, so I could see my aunt's final resting place.

Francis remembered exactly what Guido had said then, his voice trembling: "We owe it to your friend, although it's really the least we can do. Do you want to know the last words your father said to me before he found eternal peace? After briefly evoking the sad events of 1958, Robert clasped my hands in his and said, 'The hardest thing, Guido, will be to make sure that the stick that almost killed the father doesn't harm the son. May the Lord give Francis an upstanding heart.' And with that prayer, he took his last breath. That extraordinary man, a righteous man the likes of which I've rarely met, left us on a beautiful and luminous winter morning, when snowflakes floated down over Brussels, a beautiful cloud of immaculate chrysalides."

—

Once back in Brussels, my friend went to see Nathalie and told her the incredible story of the princess from Heysel's "Congolese village," the hallucinatory circumstances that led to her arrival in their country and her tragic end in May 1958. He spoke, too, of the posthumous mission he'd

accepted. Nathalie suggested that, after he told me in private everything he knew about my deceased aunt, he invite me to her house.

When he couldn't reach me, he contacted Passy and told him he had some very serious information to share with me about the aunt I was looking for. I went to rue des Courlis in Watermael-Boitsfort where I listened in stunned silence. I showed no emotion, except for when he first mentioned my Ndoyi's name, and then a bit later, when he mentioned the sacred necklace. Once he was done I fell apart, unable to contain the pain that was eating away at me from the inside.

I thought, among other things, about the fact that just a few months earlier, during the car show—which was held in the same place where my Ndoyi had been treated like an animal in a cage, just a few hundred meters from the old Heysel stadium where Passy had been attacked by a segment of fans after scoring the winning goal in the Champions League—two individuals had come out of nowhere to harass me, as if I were nothing more than a piece of meat tossed out for stray dogs.

In my worst nightmares, never could I have imagined such cynicism on the part of fate.

Francis let me cry my heart out for half an hour, maybe more. Out of eyeshot, he drank half a bottle of gin but still couldn't to get ahold of his emotions. Later, in the courtyard below, I told him how our family had suffered over the past four decades. How we'd been pulled this way and that by false rumors and actual hoaxes, false hopes and dead ends. I told him you'd given up after spending a fortune crisscrossing Congo to consult all the *nganga* who were supposed to be able to tell what was true from what was false. Before the Council of Elders and Notables, you'd begged for forgiveness for your serious failings and accepted all consequences. You abdicated your throne, allowing one of your nephews to succeed you, and then chose exile in the capital to escape the mockery of some of your subjects.

That afternoon, in Watermael-Boitsfort, my friend learned that you were entering your eighty-fourth year, that you were still alive and living with my father in the capital.

Francis and I agreed to meet two days later at Place Madou, so we could go together to the cemetery. If Passy wanted to come, Francis added, he'd be welcome. I said I didn't want my man there with me in Laeken, given the circumstances. Before walking me to the tram stop, Francis passed on Nathalie's invitation. I promised to think about it. I'd decide after our visit to his family crypt where the spirit of my homonym, the first "star of whom the river asks its way," was waiting for me.

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Before going to the cemetery in Laeken, I wanted to see Jeff the African—among my Belgian friends, he was the best informed about everything related to the country’s colonial past. I hoped he’d have suggestions for things I could read about the World’s Fair my Ndoyi would have experienced, as well as about similar events held in Belgium over the years. Overwhelmed by what Francis and he had told me, I felt obliged to reconsider the path I’d chosen for my studies, which would begin once I’d gotten a valid residency visa, something Passy and I were still hoping for.

A voice told me I needed to study history.

I wanted then and still do want to focus my talents on diving deeply into the past, not only into the belly of the Belgian Congo but also, to the extent possible, into both the dark and luminous corners of our history, the history of the peoples who would one day form the Congo Free State. History doesn’t only tell of Diogo Cão, David Livingston, Henry Morton Stanley, Léopold II, Tippu Tip, Baudouin I, Lumumba, Mobutu, and Joseph Kabila. What was needed—what I needed to learn and maybe one day teach—was history that goes back before our ancestor, the Valiant Sovereign Woto. A history that includes the epic of the Kongo kings and, following in their path, Kimpa Vita, who some still call the Black Joan of Arc, as well as the prophet Simon Kimbangu, who was enchained and martyred by Bula Matari. I felt then as I do now a pressing need to dig into the overgrown memory of a world where mystery and evidence stand side-by-side, something my school studies and the various history books I’d picked up over the years had barely let me glimpse.

I know Papa and you want me to become a first-rate political leader, a survivor of the Nyimi dynasty in a state that continues to minimize what we've inherited from the dynasties of an earlier age. But what sort of leader would I be, what sort of authority could I claim, if what I offered my people wasn't informed by a deep understanding of who we are, who we see ourselves to be? If I were unable to use that understanding to challenge the vision put forth by someone who believes, rightly or wrongly, that they know more about my identity than I do? Or worse, if I failed to expand my knowledge to include the other peoples with whom we share, whether we're aware of it or not, an infinite number of connections, far more than anyone could trace out in just one lifetime?

The sociologist had asked me to meet him at five p.m. on the Solbosch Campus, the main campus of the Université Libre de Bruxelles, where he had a meeting. On the phone, Jeff the African let me know that his friend had given him an overview of the tragedy in which we were entangled. He expressed his compassion and promised to do everything he personally could to resolve my petition for asylum as quickly as possible, "so that I can enroll you in the Department of History, Arts, and Archaeology of the university where I served as the dean until three years ago. You'll be in very good hands there, you'll see."

After the customary kiss on the cheek, I dove right in, asking him straight out, without having thought it through and clearly reeling from the wave of emotions flooding over me, what part of our shared history our two countries, Congo and Belgium, should feel the least proud of besides the World's Fairs—he'd already sent me the titles of three books he would lend me about them.

The author of *The Fall of the Father* and *Hospitality and Sexuality Among the Batswa People of the Ubangi in the Congo Basin* didn't bat an eyelid; my question echoed, it seems, those of the hundreds of people who listened avidly to his lectures each year. He got off his bicycle, took a deep breath, and stared at the buildings of the faculty of sciences across the street before starting to speak, in a calm and neutral voice.

“What I’d point to, dear Princess of the Bakubas, is the more than two hundred fetuses, skulls, and other African skeletal remains that have been kept—some since the end of the nineteenth century—within the walls you see over there, in the anthropology and genetics lab of your future university. There are others at the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences, where the now-deceased father of a good friend mine worked until the end of the 1980s.”

I was frozen in place. “Skulls and fetuses? What are you talking about, Jeff the African?”

“I thought you wanted to study history. So maybe take that as a little appetizer. Not very inviting, to be sure, but one can ask anything of history, except that it transform a lie into truth—that’s a privilege the field ceded to the historian, do you follow me? I’m talking about history, and it’s important you capture the nuance. What I’m referring to are the heads of the kings and chiefs of Congolese tribes who resisted Léopold’s armies, leaders like the great and heroic Chief Lusinga, who was decapitated in 1884 near Lake Tanganyika by the men of the fourth expedition of the International African Association, led by a certain Émile Storms. I’m talking about men and sometimes women devoted to freedom who called on their followers to engage in civil disobedience while whole regions were subjected to forced labor for the construction of, among other projects, the railroad between Matadi and Stanley Pool from 1890 to 1898. Ask your grandfather, I’m sure the Nyimi would have much to say on the topic. In short, when faced with all those brave people who refused to submit to the invader’s forces, Léopold II’s emissaries, sent to explore and then exploit the resources of the Congo basin, didn’t just twiddle their thumbs, my dear princess. In my book, which I’ll lend to you one of these days, I touch briefly on the topic in a chapter dedicated to the Batetela revolt, although I don’t go into it in great detail, given the focus of the monograph. I won’t give you my whole lecture here, not tonight. But to come back to your question, I don’t think I’m best placed to know what the Congolese ought to be the most shamed of, other than their undeniable responsibility for the elimination of Patrice Lumumba and his two companions in January 1961.

Because, between you and me, for things to have gotten to that point, Africans had to have shut their eyes and refused to see the crude trap set by the former occupier and its imperialist allies, the ‘Mericans chief among them. But as for Belgium, the macabre collections brought back to the metropole under the pretense of science clearly stand as the scandal my country will not be able to hide forever—are you with me?”

Out of habit, he offered me a cigarette, before realizing his gaffe and apologizing.

I asked him how it was that a part of that collection of bones had ended up in the university where he taught and where he was encouraging me to enroll.

He told me about an anthropologist named Émile Houzé. An anthropologist, to put it very, very simply in our language, is a scientist whose knowledge tries to encompass the full scope of disciplines that study human society. Jeff the African explained that Houzé made his reputation as the theoretician of the supposed superiority of the Celts over the Germanic tribes, and more specifically, of the Walloons over the Flemings. Yes, yes, Grandpa, among the *mindele*, too, and well before Adolf Hitler and his great war that cost us Prince Osako, strange theories were used to justify putting humans into boxes, and stacking them one on top of the other, a bit like how here the Batswa are classified below the Mongo, who are themselves below the Bakongo, and so on.

Houzé, a former professor at the Université Libre de Bruxelles, brought that collection to the school where Francis Dumont teaches law and he sociology. If you can believe it, the same individual apparently also presented the human remains collected by Émile Storms, who I mentioned earlier, to the Anthropology Society in Brussels, an organization whose members included all the specialists in the field. When that scientific conference took place, sometime in 1886—Jeff the African was quite specific about that date, as if he’d spent his life talking about this horrid character—the speaker apparently pulled out the skull of the great Chief Lusinga and used it to illustrate what his audience had already learned from the various scientific publications of the day. Holding up the trophy—the

pride of Storm's collection—for his audience, equally captivated by his charm and the range of his knowledge, Émile Houzé reportedly let loose with a sentence that my friend said he remembered word for word, because he quoted it frequently. Jeff so often gave speeches criticizing scientific approaches aligned with the ultranationalist movements that he'd become their *bête noire*. "The specimen's exceptionally wide biorbital angle is categorical proof of its inferiority relative to other human races. And what is scientifically true for this warlord, distinguished by his suicidal bravura, is naturally true as well for all those of his species who have not undergone physical modifications as a result of crossbreeding."

Those words had torn his face into the grimace that appears each time he tries to stifle a curse. I knew those theories belonged to a bygone era, a world built on lies and manipulation that had very little in common with what young Belgians learned at his university in 2004. I pointed that out to him.

"Then the question, my dear princess, is why don't we return those remains to Congo, since we have enough information at our disposal to identify both the victims and their descendants? And from that question follows another, my dear friend: Why does the Royal Museum for Central Africa that you and Passy visited only expose the thousands of artifacts obtained either from individuals known for their checkered pasts or from organizations like the now defunct *Compagnie du Kasai*, one of the largest havens for those bloodthirsty collectors of 'red rubber' ever found in Congo, without deigning to inform its visitors of the conditions in which those antiquities were wrested from their owners?"

He abruptly stopped and read a message that had just popped up on his telephone, which he then slipped back into his pocket, and then invited me to walk with him. We headed toward the Bois de la Cambre, the sporadic clicking of his bicycle spokes setting the pace for our steps along the sidewalk, now wet from a little shower that had quickly come and gone. In the distance, toward Flagey, along the Ixelles Ponds where I would go every other Sunday or so to commune with a play by Maryse Condé or the poetry of the Palestinian Mahmoud Darwish, whose work my previous boyfriend

had adored, the firefighters' sirens wailed and their lights spun in a kaleidoscope of brilliant flashes. Brussels had other worries on her mind.

As we walked, he told me that six years before, when he realized that a Congolese student who'd joined his theater troupe shared a last name with a chief who'd been decapitated in Mbanza Mfumu-Nkento, in the Kwilu region, he'd gone back to his hometown of Bruges. There he met with a childhood friend who'd just been named the minister of cooperation and development for the federal government. Jeff Funcken was hoping that, due to their old friendship, he'd be able to slip a few words in the ear of the newly named minister, who was staying in Groenerei, the beautiful neighborhood where they'd grown up and where their respective parents still lived. In his mind, it was time for the ruling coalition to send a strong signal on an issue where there was already clear consensus.

The minister confessed that, as the granddaughter of one of the most respected anthropologists in Europe, she was the cabinet member who knew the most about the dossier. She'd even seen Chief Lusinga's skull with her own eyes during a visit to the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences. After that confession, however, she sought to put an end to the conversation by asserting that Belgium wasn't yet ready to reopen that painful page from its past. In official quarters there was one rule: "Not L nor L"—in other words, "Not Lumumba nor Lusinga."

After pointing out that Belgium had opened a parliamentary inquiry into the assassination of Patrice Lumumba, something he himself had pressed for in the 1990s, I asked my friend if he'd been satisfied by the answer from the minister?

"Well, there isn't much left to be said about Lumumba. We know pretty much everything already. The parliamentary commission even heard testimony from that scoundrel Gerard Soete, the former chief of police in the Belgian Congo, who affirmed quite baldly that he'd used a saw to cut up

Lumumba's body on the night of January 22–23, 1961, and that he'd then dissolved it in acid he'd gotten from the big mining company."

"I'd heard that."

"I'm not surprised—the gentleman even bragged about it on his deathbed three years ago. But to come back to your question, my dear princess, I suggested my friend get out of her ivory tower, even if just for a minute, and put herself in the shoes of an African woman—I knew she could do that. To imagine what it would be like to go through a museum in Berlin or another city in the land of Otto von Bismarck, and to happen upon human remains from Belgium, including the skull of a burgher from Bruges deported in 1942 and identified as such. A man who, why not, shared the same last name as her own spouse whose father, a union leader well known in Flanders, had been shot in front of the Saint-Sauveur Cathedral by the Nazis. I stared right into her beautiful turquoise eyes and asked if she'd just return calmly to Brussels, thinking there was nothing to make a fuss about. That above all, nothing should be asked of the German authorities, since our country wasn't ready to reopen a page that could harm its harmonious relationship with one of its most faithful allies in the European Union."

"Her answer?"

"Her answer...Frankly, I don't know how I'd have reacted to what she said if Madam Minister were not the girl who'd deflowered me at the age of seventeen, in a barn in Sint-Kruis on New Year's Eve. Here's what she said, her voice full of condescension: 'Jeff the African, who dreams of reincarnation as a Bantu chief to make up for the bad karma of being a Western man tormented by the ghosts of the past, maybe it's time I teach you something very simple. While the Belgians demanded and received from the Germans what was owed them, more or less, at the end of the war, such is not the case for the Congolese. Faced with a failed economy and a war that threatens what little remains of their government, our African friends have other things on their minds than asking our government to return those shameful collections, the existence of which both you and I can only deplore.' "

His telephone rang for the second time in less than a minute. I recognized a song by the Beninese singer Angélique Kidjo.

He stepped away, exchanged a few phrases in Lingala with someone, most likely his wife, then turned back to me. He apologized; his wife's goddaughter had been invited for dinner and he was now half an hour late. The sociologist promised to loan me another book on those infamous "shameful collections" that neither Passy nor Francis knew anything about, that is until I spoke to them the following day.

"The next time you walk through the Square de Meeûs, take a good look, my dear princess: The bust in the middle of the square is General Émile Storms himself. *We hebben een monument voor hem opgericht.*"

"In French, please."

"We built a monument to the glory of the criminal Storms, Nyota!"

Still holding his straw hat, which the wind had kept blowing around as we'd walked, the Fleming got on his bicycle and melted into the dark of the night, like a giant ghost. Just as his silhouette was about to disappear behind a dumpster, I heard his voice rise up over the sound of a racing motorcycle.

"Maybe the child Nathalie Tielemans will give to this country will find in a history book written by a Bakuba princess a reason to rid Brussels of all the garbage that defiles it."

—

A light drizzle was falling on the morning we finally passed through the cemetery gate. Each of us needed to be alone in that moment, to really hear the inner voices that had been our companions those last days.

It was the first time my friend had visited the family crypt since his mother's death. Every year he vowed to place bouquets of chrysanthemums on her grave and his brother Sébastien's on their respective birthdays, which were only a few days apart. Alas, he confessed, he never had the strength to face the dizzying silence and emptiness of that place.

That morning, the man now dozing at your feet opened himself up—heart, soul, and mind—to the memory of his deceased father. He solemnly

promised to go to the Democratic Republic of the Congo to complete the mission he'd been given after his father's death. He also promised that the day he had a son, he'd suggest his mother name him Robert.

As for me, I sought to manage my pain with both dignity and modesty. Following the example of the many mourners carved in stone and bronze on the tombs—over which loomed the busts of austere, bearded notables, vestiges of a bygone era whose plot twists had called Francis and me to this darkly charming and forgotten place—I stood before the open crypt. For about an hour, I was frozen there, staring at the plaque inscribed with the name and age of the rebellious dancer from Expo 58, who'd been thrown into history's dungeon and forgotten by the Belgian kingdom. I tried to imagine what she might have said to me after seeing me arrive at the end of my long and painful quest. What would my Ndoyi have told me of her long path from Mushenge to Brussels, via Léopoldville?

Before leaving the site, I gathered a handful of earth from the tomb and slipped it into an envelop that I later placed in the pencil case I have in my hand.

In the café where we retreated to raise a glass to the memory of those we'd lost, I told my friend I hoped to go with him to Congo. He was so overjoyed that before I'd finished speaking, he leapt from his seat and wrapped me in an embrace so swiftly that the server coming to our table jumped back. He hurried to explain that he couldn't leave Belgium until after Nathalie had given birth, which would take place in another seventeen weeks, but more realistically, he'd want to wait another six months after the baby's arrival. I said that was perfect for me. In practical terms, for a woman asking for asylum, as I was, travel outside Europe was something that only Mamie Solution and her subterranean network could arrange. And Passy also wanted me to go with him to Majorca, in Spain, for the wedding of one of his good friends, an Angolan who played for the Portuguese team Guimarães.

BACK IN CONGO

TWENTY-FOUR

HOURS LATER

After sitting patiently for a long while in a minuscule waiting room with freshly repainted walls, a nurse's assistant let us know we could go to the room where Grandpa was resting. Like the night before, the place smells of medicine, Betadine, plaster, and citronella tea. On my right, Francis, who'd barely gotten any sleep after my sister and I dropped him off at the hotel a bit after midnight, is groggy, with bloodshot eyes. I watch him gaze at the king lying there on a metal bed, dressed in his beautiful red suit, his body covered with the same blue sheet. We could still see the splotch from the coffee my mother had been trying to get him to drink when we arrived.

His face gaunt, his skin dry and papery, Grandpa has seen better days.

He'd lived through so many illnesses, including an epidemic of typhoid fever that had ravaged the capital a few months earlier, and now he's on his deathbed, having collapsed on the floor after leaping from his chair to grab the television remote.

It happened at my parents' home. The guest on the variety show *In Rumba Veritas*, none other than Dean Wendo Kolosoy himself, announced in a trembling voice his definitive retirement from the music scene, "because age has finally had the last word. It's time I take care of these old bones of mine," he explained, his eyes unfocused and lost. When the king heard those words, he stopped eating his *foufou* and moved closer to the TV set. He didn't want to miss anything the seventy-something star was going to say to his fans who were calling the number flashing at the bottom of the screen from all over the capital. Grandpa felt personally implicated because he'd long asked himself the same questions that the most beloved artist on both sides of the river now faced. Questions about the man and the singer—a figure Grandpa regarded with a mix of fascination and disbelief. One day he'd confided that he wasn't sure if he adored the young man who'd once defied the clergy of the Apostolic Vicariate of the mission in the Belgian Congo, or if he celebrated the old, prolific singer that younger generations continued to copy.

“What an enigma, that Wendo, huh! No stronger than a cricket and still that inimitable voice of his—sometimes low and silky, then suddenly sharp and moving; it gets every hair on your body standing up straight. He lights the whole country on fire with just one melody, as if before him there’d never been any man capable of putting two words together and making a woman’s heart race. No surprise that liars keep saying he’s made a pact of sperm and blood with Mami Wata,” he’d blurted the day before, when my mother let him know that the man who’d written “Marie-Louise,” the big hit of his youth they could hear playing in the bar across the street, would be on the show Saturday night.

Is there any clairvoyant in this country, even just one prophet, who could have predicted that after standing up to the colonial power, the intractable Kena Kwete III would be teetering on the point of no return because he’d taken just a few steps to listen carefully to the last words of the singer Wendo Kolosoy, whose repertoire he knew half of by heart? “There’s no fucker worse than fate, my young friends, and that’s how you can recognize each of its tricks”: those are the words the patriarch hammered out his whole life long, without the least inkling that one day we’d be left speechless by that phrase, when we finally gathered in memory of my Ndoyi, because his breath would be more precious to us than all the cowries in the court of the Nyimi.

Papa whispers something in my ear.

The news is not reassuring. The doctor, a family friend who didn’t want to raise alarms, also didn’t hide what really had him worried. When he’d fallen, before my sister rushed into the living room and started first aid, the patient’s head had hit the floor and hard, resulting in a concussion. That wouldn’t have been too serious, the generalist explained, if the patient were young and in relatively good health. But that’s not the king’s case, to put it mildly. The only musculoskeletal problem noted when he was admitted was a wound on his neck; the hemorrhage was staunched with a few stitches. Because of his cognitive state, which the doctor continued to monitor, vestibular physiotherapy might be recommended, especially if signs of

confusion or a loss of consciousness recurred. Then we would all have to leave the room.

As Francis, who'd been warmly welcomed by Papa and the rest of the family, asks me why the doc had let us interrupt the rest of a patient who clearly needs peace and quiet, Papa gestures for us to follow him into the hallway. There we see a young man, a preacher apparently, with one hand placed on a woman who seemed wracked by horrible pains. "*Bima! Bima! Bima!* In Jesus's name, be gone!" the stranger shouts, punctuating each cry by bringing an enormous Bible down on the woman's head, as a random assortment of flabbergasted bystanders, both patients and visitors, looks on. When a group of nurses comes by, the evangelist abruptly stops and stuffs the holy book into a plastic bag.

We keep walking without saying a word.

Once outside, a warm, humid breeze surrounds us. I explain to my friend that my father believes Grandpa likely doesn't have long to live, although the doctor didn't want to tell us. We need to take advantage of any moments of lucidity he has left to connect with him. My father's afraid the king will lay down his arms unaware of the importance of the messages he has yet to share. In the wee hours of the morning, after we'd left, the king had confided to my father that he'd been very interested in the story I'd told. He had things to tell us, but hoped to respect tradition by letting his guest speak first, to reveal "what wind brought him to the feet of an old man who can no longer ask the best palm-wine tapper in the Kuba Kingdom for libations to honor a such a distinguished guest."

That's when the evangelist-exorcist walked by.

I hear Francis, who's trying to muster up his courage, whisper to my father that the good altar boy he'd been in a previous life would've said that it's easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a hurried visitor to make his way through the crowd gathered around the wandering preacher. "Welcome to Jesusville, Professor Dumont!" my father replies—that was the first time I'd seen him smile since I'd gotten back. Now it was the turn of a young kid with vacant eyes and bulging ribs to get the pastor's Bible right in the face. Once. Twice.

“Nani Moknozi?”^[1]

“Yesu!”

The kid wobbled then fell, shuddering like a fish out of water. About thirty heads leaned over the ailing boy. I see my mother, dressed in black, the only one in the family who hadn't yet shaken Francis's hand. A voice cries, “Hallelujah!” A chorus of amens follow.

We don't stick around to see what happens next.

Back to the hospital room, where my mama and sister join us.

My eyes go from Papa's rough and inscrutable face to Grandpa's, now livid, with a glance at stoic Francis. I realize that if the old man loses consciousness again, that wouldn't make my friend's trip meaningless, but the gesture would no longer hold the same significance. Something I couldn't quite name would be lost. Francis, who's certainly no fool, is well aware of that.

Before we'd begun our journey, I'd listened as Nathalie encouraged him to prepare what he would say, to choose his words carefully. “My dear, you must not say anything that will inflict even more pain than what they've already suffered from not knowing and imagining the worst.” But the news of Grandpa's hospitalization, which we'd heard when we got off the plane, caught him off guard. I remind him that I'll be the most faithful of interpreters and encourage him to speak simply, without any unnecessary detours. I'd already communicated the essentials, and the patient was ready for what was to come.

—

My friend quickly introduces himself, gives a slightly idealized version of the story of how we met, mentions my boyfriend and his friend Jeff Funcken, whom he credits with playing a crucial role in the saga that brought us together under Kinshasa's skies. Then he cites the singer Papa Wemba, when he meant Papa Wendo, and dives into the heart of the matter.

Grandpa lies on his bed, his eyes closed, his breathing irregular, the blue sheet gently rustling with the breeze floating in through the window. He

nods slightly as Francis speaks, letting us know he's listening. Francis tells him everything. What he learned from reading the notebook left by his father, what his friend Guido Martens De Neuberg added over the next few months. When I see on Grandpa's face that a detail affects him deeply, I gesture to my friend, and we pause.

When Francis evokes the fateful accident in Heysel Park, more specifically, when he names the one responsible for the blow that inadvertently felled the princess, Grandpa opens his eyes for the first time. As he stares at Francis, who holds his gaze, I hear a whisper of a voice ask a question I immediately translate. He wants to know if the man named Zando Bara was a Botswa, in other words, a Pygmy.

That really catches me off guard, especially since in my long tale the day before, I'd given no hint of the ethnic origins of the presumed murderer. I confirmed what Francis knew: A Botswa from the region around the town formerly known as Coquilhatville, in Équateur Province.

That's when Grandpa had me explain to Francis that the spirits had told him of the existence of the Pygmy, without revealing the whole story—specifically, that the man of small stature had taken his daughter's life. Then he adds, "Every year since my daughter's disappearance, at the end of the sowing season, I have the same dream. I'm sitting on the throne, surrounded by my counselors and advisers, ready to greet the young girls who've just returned from their initiation. Princess Tshala leads the procession, with the priestess Kabedi, who's in charge of the ritual, on her right. Just when my daughter raises her hand to offer me the parrot captured in the Bena Nyimi forest and, thus, open the ball, a Botswa darts out from beneath the throne. Armed with a bow, the intruder takes aim at the totemic bird and, with an arrow to its breast, shoots it dead. I immediately feel an intense pain in my heart and I wake up with a terrified cry that rouses the sleeping queen. This dream has not left me, until the night when my son, here beside you, announced your arrival, Monsieur Dumont, which is when I asked that my red suit be prepared. No oracle ever succeeded in revealing the secret of the Pygmy that you just named. I apologize for interrupting and ask that you kindly continue."

When I finished translating Francis's story, about half an hour later, my grandfather asked for a cup of water and then began to speak. But before he did, at my father's suggestion, I slipped the necklace into his hands, still wrapped in parchment, just as when Robert Dumont had placed it into the cedar box he'd deposited at the Fortis bank in 1989. Grandpa didn't open his eyes when he felt the parchment, nor did he unwrap it. With a gesture that seemed to take all his remaining strength, he raised his right hand and placed the package beside the bed, on the small black wooden table, alongside the Bible and his fetish, decorated with bright red ribbons, that he always kept with him, wherever he went.

He began by thanking the visitor, "in his name, in the name of the Nyimi dynasty, and that of all our people, both living and dead." After apologizing for not being able to welcome the foreign guest as he should—"because fate is a son of a bitch; it honors whomever it wants without a second glance, it always has, and humiliates the most mighty when they least expect it; that's fate's way of reminding them that they have no master other than its passing fancy"—he declares that this is the most important day of his life. Then he launches into a long mea culpa. I feel obliged to wait, letting him go on for several minutes before I don't so much translate as summarize what he said.

The king blames no one but himself for the punishment that has kept almost half of the women in his line from giving birth. He alone is responsible for what ravaged his palace and brought him to his knees. There are many excuses he could invoke to convince his fellows—and his family first and foremost—that he had nothing to blame himself for, because on the day that blasphemer of a Belgian district administrator wagged his finger beneath his royal nose, he'd done just what a worthy descendant of the Valient Sovereign Woto was supposed to. But that would not have made anyone forget that "in the darkest night, the elephant's foot never squashes the baby elephant, or that behind every woman who advances on bended knee stands the patriarchy." Nor, he hammered, would it have changed the wine of anger into a life-giving decoction.

Still, he had held on to the wound and not life, to decadence and not revival. He said he was a man of bygone era. A man who could not hide his shame as he prepared to deliver his testament to his eldest son, who would in turn transmit it to his descendants scattered across the vast Congo. He was from a time when every Bakuba king believed, rightly or wrongly, that he could command the Sun and be obeyed; put off introspection and retraction to a tomorrow that would never come. That same era when the most insignificant servant of the Belgian king, including that military officer who cut off heads and had them sent back to his native Belgium to delight the crowds and feed the desires of learned men, believed that trampling underfoot the dignity of a “native” was what gave meaning to his holy mission. On both sides of the border traced by fate, something known as “the heart’s rebellion” was seen as the worst abomination of all, because it dared to treat skin color as a mere abstraction. A barrier the district administrator René Comhaire and the young princess Tshala had breached, knowingly and unashamedly.

That era had passed away without him, Kena Kwete III, having the least inkling.

Patrice Lumumba, the hero who’d inhabited the young monarch’s dreams, had been turned into both the thorn in the side of the whites and the scarecrow of his own Black brothers. More than four decades after his disappearance, the location of his grave remains unknown. Ashamed of the role it played in silencing the rebel, whose only sin had been to love his country unconditionally and to predict for it a glorious future, the newly independent Congo had changed its name. It allowed local traitors whose hands were stained with the prophet’s blood to claim to be the country’s saviors. The new Zaire continued undermining the traditional royalty; when there was no longer enough money to bribe the traditional chiefs, prison broke the backs of those who resisted and then spilled their blood on a land ever thirsty for sacrifice. Then everyone more or less ended up forgetting the prophet as well as his widow, whom the vanquishers had dragged half naked through the streets of Léo the day his death was announced to the

world. But now, there was nothing to keep Zaire from becoming Congo again.

Grandpa's voice is barely audible, so I lean closer and closer to transmit Francis's final request, uttered in a voice growing ever more hesitant. Well aware of the colossal debt history demanded from his family, Francis said he'd traveled more than six thousand kilometers from the Belgian capital to that of its former colony with one purpose. My friend asked forgiveness, in the name of his father and to carry out his last wishes—forgiveness for the irreparable act that had brought him now to kneel before the man who had for so long searched in the mists for his daughter's traces. He added that if times have changed, still nothing could justify what happened when the princess arrived in the land of his birth.

Because part of him could not accept Grandpa's relativistic take on the tragedy that had brought us together, Francis tried to make his case again. He explained that the discomfort his father had admitted feeling in the days leading up to the fatal accident were proof that in the heart of anyone who really tried to understand his own innate humanity, there was a voice that challenged the external praise coming from the crowds. It said that all who had thrown those Black bodies into the lion's den were guilty of something far worse than a lapse of judgment. Alas, that voice had not led to his salvation. The internal voice that spoke up in May 1958, at the foot of the Atomium in Brussels, was unable to save his father, and had no chance of protecting Princess Tshala Nyota Moelo.

I tried to translate this as best I could into our language, Bushong, and appreciated the help of my father, who twice came to my rescue.

Grandpa opens his eyes again.

As the sky turns dark and a storm threatens to pour down over Kinshasa for the rest of the evening, the king tries to string together words my father now hurries to translate for Francis, who is still standing before his interlocutor. Words the ailing man pronounces haltingly, but whose meaning is crystal clear.

"I learned, my son, that you are a lawyer, in other words, a great notable, and also a teacher, which means a guide. Listening to you, your

language tells me just that; your words serve both your heart and your mind. But you are heading down the wrong path when you give an isolated voice more power than it ever had. You're going down the wrong path because such a voice might save a straw from the fire, but it will never keep the savanna from going up in flames. It's the savanna that ought to have been saved, teacher, the savanna and nothing less. And in the drama that concerns us now, it's not so much your father's failure we should deplore but that of his era, which is also mine, a failure that nothing can now change. I'm speaking of a time that did everything in its power so that the savanna of our diminished lives, of our trampled past and our ongoing misery, would be swept away by the flames of disdain and ignorance, turned into smoke without our all-powerful masters even batting an eyelid. They came in the name of a god they called Love, a Holy Spirit that they betrayed right beneath our eyes as soon as they realized they couldn't complete their project if their hands were tied by obedience to his Ten Commandments."

He pauses, wets his lips with the tip of his very pale pink tongue, and signals to Grandma, who helps him drink a few swallows of citronella tea. Then he turns to the little bedside table, grasps the parchment containing the necklace, and places it gently on his chest. He covers it with the palm of his right hand, as if to protect it from the breeze or the eyes of those around him. Only then does he begin to speak once more.

"Teacher, son, with your presence on the land of our ancestors and with the return of the necklace of my foremother, Ngokady, you have accomplished something far more important than you realize. I wish my words could fully express what it means to me—but that's impossible. You have honored the memory of your father, my brother, a fellow man I would have liked to meet. Yes, I would have liked to meet Monsieur Dumont. I'll say it again so you really understand: You have no need to ask my forgiveness. Not you, who was barely a speck of blood when the irreparable took place on the other side of the world. You, a grain of sand on the bottom of the big river that, since time immemorial, flows into the infinite. But don't believe I'm unaware of the importance of your request, formulated in

such an anguished voice, as you stand at the foot of my bed, your eyes fixed on the ground by a shame you cannot bear.

“So from the depths of my heart, before Bumba Chembe, the Creator, and all his creatures gathered at my bedside today, with all my soul, which now holds no secrets for any of you, I offer you the forgiveness you so amply deserve, despite everything. If your father or your king were here, they, too, would have received it, both of them, the same clemency, even before the least murmur escaped from their lips, even though they were the sons of that original barbarity I spoke of not long ago. If either of them had chosen to meet me, despite the many reasons they had to dread a face-to-face encounter, it would have been more than enough. The journey, that heartfelt impulse far more important than the most striking of speeches, would have reduced the great river that has divided us for so long into a mere trickle, barely even a stream. The journey, my son. The journey...Do you understand?

“To the loquacious and shameless Osako, my now deceased brother, our father once declared, ‘The wise man drinks a lot, but pisses with care.’ And, I’ll add, when illness gets involved, the wise man with big ears becomes even more parsimonious with his urine, drinking from the lips of the big talker as well as those of the knowledgeable, but only opening his own mouth to say the Essential.

“Since I still have the breath to speak, teacher, and the tomb is not pressing for my arrival, let me get to the Essential. For as long as the earth has been our shared home, peoples have met, sometimes in joy, sometimes in pain, sometimes caught up in happiness, sometimes under the yoke of barbarity. It’s not the wounds they inflict upon each other that matter the most once time finally lifts the veil from our illusions. What matters, son, is that the children who come after learn to build a less repugnant world than the one they inherited. That’s what your friend, whom my valiant granddaughter Nyota described at length last night, seems to have understood—you call him Jean or Joseph the African. Forgive me if I’m getting the nickname wrong, I mostly tried to imagine the face of that Fleming with ideas far broader than the narrow-minded country fate

assigned him at birth. Fate is a bastard that only ever follows its own whims.

“You see, memory is not a tribunal: It’s an antidote for the future, but an antidote that only works when someone asks for it, wants to bet on a different future. And that’s precisely why, my son, after I offered my forgiveness to your father and your king—if they had deigned to make the journey in your place—after I’d welcomed them as I welcomed you here, where this diminished body holds me captive, I would’ve drawn their attention to the following fact: Princess Tshala is no longer of this world and nothing you can do will bring her back to us. You white men have performed many miracles, no doubt, and not just small ones, but I’ve never heard that your learned men have managed to overcome death—and that’s something we should all be grateful for. Yet, and this is the most important thing I have to say, while you can do nothing more for my daughter, there in the land of your ancestors where she rests, day and night, season after season, tens of thousands of others are arriving...” An awful cough racks him.

Grandpa crumples under the pain this final effort inflicts on his body, weakened by age and the hemorrhage two days before. With great care, Papa wraps him in his arms and helps him to sit up again. He has a moment of relief, just a few seconds before a new round of coughing and spasms literally lifts him out of his bed, as if he’d been pushed from behind, propelled by some invisible force. He starts to gasp uncontrollably, and his feet, sticking out from beneath the sheet, convulse. Grandma, Mama, and my sister, who were standing by the window, hurry over, their quick reaction reflecting the panic that floods over each of us, like an icy chill from a gust of air.

Heeding my father’s request, Zuena rushes out to find the doctor who’d vanished after quickly peeking in just a few moments earlier.

In the room, the patient’s gasps were becoming less frequent but more and more violent. After two minutes, that seemed like they spanned a thousand seconds, peace. A silence as sudden as it was agonizing—the only sound a fly spiraling over the bed. The pest fails to find an escape through

the latticework dividing the room, then meanders along the side wall before finally finding its way out through the open window. No one said a thing, not one word, not one prayer.

In the hallway a man is screaming his head off: “If you think that Jesus Christ is the King of Kings and the Doctor of Doctors, say amen, my sister!”

I see Mama’s lips move.

As for the patient, he is barely moving, taking only sporadic, shallow breaths. His wife tries in vain to slip a few drops of water between his tightly pressed lips, but his jaw only clenches harder. I watch him bending and unbending his right knee, shifting his head on his pillow, but remaining passive as his son tries to soothe his withered arms, limp at his sides. The sigh he releases in his final throes is drowned out by the pinging of raindrops on the curved tiles of the hospital roof.

“Say amen, my brother!” thunders the voice at the end of the hallway.

My telephone vibrates. A message from Passy. *You’d have loved it: On channel 2, the African burns that philosopher you hate. Our warrior is holding up? Love you. XO*

While the rain pours down on Kinshasa and its nine million souls, the sobs of my father—that man I’d never seen shed a single tear in all my life—lend something surreal to the scene playing out before my eyes; I know it will long haunt my sleepless nights. In the shadows that fall when the electricity suddenly cuts out, Papa holds out his right hand to me. His left seems to reach for Francis.

[SKIP NOTES](#)

[1.](#) “Who is the King?”

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Blaise Ndala

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Amy B. Reid

Sarasota, Florida

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BLAISE NDALA is a Canadian writer originally from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. His debut novel, *J'irai danser sur la tombe de Senghor*, won the Ottawa Book Award for French fiction and was a finalist for the Trillium Book Award. His book *Sans capote ni kalachnikov* won the 2019 Le Combat des livres and was a finalist for the Grand prix littéraire d'Afrique noire and the Trillium Book Award. *In the Belly of the Congo* is his first book to appear in English.

AMY B. REID is an award-winning translator. In 2017 she received a Literature Translation Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts for *When the Plums Are Ripe*, by Patrice Nganang. Her other translations include novels by Véronique Tadjo, Mutt-Lon, and Marie-Célie Agnant. She earned her PhD in French from Yale University and is a professor of French and Gender Studies at New College of Florida.

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